

衣笠彰梧

KINUGASA SYOUGO

トモセシユンサク

TOMOSESHUNSAKU

6

ようこそ
実力至上主義
の**教室**へ

ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゅ
のきょうしつ



MF文庫



Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no
Kyoushitsu e

Welcome to the Classroom of the Know-It-Alls
vol.6

by Kinugasa Syohgo

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6

ようこそ
じつりょく
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のようしゅへ

ようこそ**実力至上主義**の**教室**へ

衣笠彰梧 X
トモセシュンサク

は せ べ は る か
長谷部波増加

三宅と同様、誰かとあまり絡まない、自称「孤独組」のDクラス女子。すぐに人をあだ名で呼ぶ癖がある。

ゆき むら けい せい
幸村啓誠

Dクラスではトップレベルの学力を持つ男子。カードが取れ、クラスに貢献しようと考えが変わり始めている。

み やけ あき と
三宅明人

日頃から物静かで誰かと絡む様子を殆ど見かけないDクラスの男子。弓道部に所属している。

「綾小路くんって喋るんだ」

「折角部活が休みなのに何時間も勉強で時間を失いたくない。終われば帰れるんだろ？」

「俺が教えるんだから中間テストより高い点を絶対取ってもらうからな」



「それは……それは買いかぶりすぎだよ堀北さん」

どこまでも真っ直ぐ、どこまでも
も実直に答えてきた一之瀬の瞳が
初めて泳いだのをオレは見た。



「わたし、わたし、私も
綾小路くんのグループに入れて！」

緊張で顔は露骨に高揚し赤くなっている。視点が全く定まっていないせいか、慌てたせいでズレたメガネの位置がおかしいことに気づいていない。



Prologue: Kushida Kikyou's Monologue

Do people really live by their ideals? I do. I'm living as my ideal self. I always knew I was blessed even when compared to my peers. I have good memory and so I excelled in academics. I'm also good at sports. I'm also confident when it comes to socializing. I'm also a very flexible person and I can adapt to almost any situation. So.

'Am I a perfect human being?'

If you ask me that, the answer would be 'no'. There are girls far more beautiful than me, there are people smarter than me and many more who are better at sports than I am. That much is obvious. But you know, there are things humans don't want to lose at no matter what. Whether it be looks or academic ability or video games or singing. When you lose at something you're supposed to be good at, anyone would feel frustrated. And I have a huge complex regarding that. Whenever I lose to people, my feelings are always greatly shaken. And with each loss, a darkness grew in my heart. Sometimes I even vomited from the intense stress. Reality is cruel like that. I know I'm not average, but I'm no genius either.

It felt good when I was a child, everyone would praise me as a genius even when all I did was accomplish simple tasks. I felt good when people praised me like that, my heart danced with joy. Whatever I did in my class, I was the best at it. I was the hero of the class as well as its idol. But when I got to middle school, I started running into people who were superior to me in those various fields. There are people I just can't beat. That reality sank heavily into my heart. And so I desperately looked for an escape from that reality. Something I won't lose to anyone at. I want people to respect me. I want people to envy me. I can't do that in academics nor sports. The answer I arrived at was---I will get people to 'trust' me more than anyone else.

By being trusted more than anyone else, I could feel a sense of superiority again. I would extend my friendship to boys so disgusting no one would bother

with them, or to girls so ugly it would make your stomach turn. I killed my emotions and put on a fake smile, a false kindness. And so I became popular. Classmates, senpais, kouhais, teachers and even strangers liked me. As far as being liked by others go, I became the strongest. And to be honest, the day I realized that, I was truly happy. And I also realized something else that day, 'trust' is a commodity more expensive than anything else. And that behind 'trust', lies 'secrets'. When a person truly trusts someone else, they will lay bare all their secrets to them.

I knew the hidden anxieties of the most popular boy in the class, as well as the fears of the smartest person in the class. From the deepest of secrets to the most trivial ones, I took control of them one by one. And every time someone confided their deepest secrets to me, my heart danced with joy. I trembled with overwhelming delight whenever I grasped someone's secret which is as important to them as their very life. I'm the most trusted person there is, and it is my life's goal to keep it as such. But I did not know at the time. Keeping secrets like that. Eventually I lived my days in constant stress.

And then---'that' incident happened. But it couldn't be helped. 'They' were the ones who rejected me. So it can't be helped. Because you hurt me, you can't complain if I hurt you in return. I will hurt others before I get hurt myself. That's obvious right? But the image of the 'ideal me' everyone saw me as was broken. Respect and envy of me disappeared, replaced with caution and hate.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I only wanted one thing. To be 'trusted' by everyone. To feel that sense of superiority once more. And so I vowed to never let it happen again, my heart felt excited for my new high school life. And this time, I will make it work. I decided that. But still---still. The first day that was supposed to be a new beginning for me turned into a nightmare. I met Horikita Suzune on the bus to the school.

She is the only one who knows about that 'incident' here. And as long as she exists, I will never know real peace.

Name	Teruhiko Yukimura (幸村 輝彦, <i>Yukimura Teruhiko</i>)
Class	1st Year, Class D
ID #	S01T004708
Club	None
Birthday	July 11th

Assessment

Academic Ability	A
Intellect	A-
Judgement	C
Physical Ability	D-
Teamwork	D-



Interviewer's Evaluation

His interview and written examination grades are all extremely excellent, but ever since elementary school and in middle school, he has neglected his social skills. He doesn't have any friends and hasn't participated in any group nor volunteer activities. Although academic skills are necessary in order to succeed in society, he has a tendency to judge people based solely on their academic performances. We expect him to improve in this aspect.

Homeroom Teacher Records

He has no problem with treating his classes seriously. However, he has not made any progress with making any friends, therefore I will impose it upon myself to keep an eye on him.

Chapter 1: The Changing Class D

(Introduction)

The sports festival ended in mid-October, around the time of year when it started getting chilly.

The school held a general election to decide who would be in charge of the next student council. Immediately after the election concluded, the school ushered in the handover ceremony of the student council. It was a large-scale event that gathered students from the entire school to the gymnasium. However, for most of the first year students, it was a very uneventful experience. They were drowsy, but they were attempting to keep quiet and slow their breathing so the teachers and upperclassmen wouldn't notice them.

"Now, here are some final remarks from president Horikita of the student council."

Following the moderator's speech, Horikita Manabu slowly approached the microphone on the stage.

If it was the Horikita from before, the younger one I mean, just seeing her brother on stage would probably make her cower.

But now, as she watched over her brother's resignation, she was staring at him with a firm look.

"I am proud and grateful to have been able to lead the student council for almost two years. Thank you very much."

After his brief statement, Horikita's brother quietly retreated and returned to his original position.

There were no moving words in his speech. It could be said that it was a solemn and dutiful statement.

However, it does not look like the retirement ceremony will end with just this.

The student council officers on the stage with him stood firm, not breaking their solid posture.

"Student president Horikita has worked so hard for you all. Now, please welcome the new student council president, second-year student of Class A, Miyabi Nagumo."

Miyabi Nagumo, the new student president, walked forward and stood in front of the microphone.

Among the student council members warmly watching over him on the stage, the figure of Ichinose could be seen.

"I am Miyabi Nagumo of the second year's Class A. President Horikita, I really appreciate your strict and kind guidance so far. I am honored and would like to pay tribute to you. I am thankful for being able to accompany the legendary president who has played one of the greatest leadership roles in the history of this school."

With that, he bowed deeply in the direction of Horikita's brother, and then re-faced the students.

"Let me introduce myself again. My name is Miyabi Nagumo. I will be the next student president of Advanced Nurturing High School. Please take care of me."

It was quite different from the attitude I had glimpsed at the sports festival. Nagumo was very polite and gentle. His expression and attitude that he held during the final leg of the relay race had entirely disappeared. But I felt we were only being shown the surface.

Nagumo smiled thin and small so as to change the calm atmosphere.

"I'll get straight to the point. First of all, I promise to change the terms and appointment method of the student council as well as the practice of the general election. This will mean changing the date of the general election of the student council from December to October. This shift will be an attempt to move to a new generation for the student council and I judge that that then will be when the new student council will move towards a new era. I will change the tenure of the president and officers from terms to indefinite so they can serve until graduation. At the same time, I will abolish the current restrictions on the number of student council officers. In other words, as long as it is an excellent and necessary person, they can become a member of the student council at any time regardless of the number of slots that are open. In the event that someone is judged unfit for office, I will establish a system of majority vote at the meetings for expelling them from their positions. As a starting point, let me make a declaration to the students, teachers, and leaders of the former student council who are assembled here. The school system of the future... I will destroy all that has been preserved by the previous student councils for the sake of the appearance of the school."

He spoke so forcefully that it seemed to negate all the merits of the former student president who stood behind him.

"I originally wanted to implement this new system immediately, but unfortunately, I cannot do that. This is because the new student president will be bound by various kinds of constraints upon first taking office."

Nagumo glanced at Horikita, the former student council president, and then turned back to the students.

"I promise that there will be a great revolution in the near future. Students with strength will climb up to the top and those without strength will fall to the bottom. I will turn this school into a real meritocracy, so please show me what you all can do."

The gymnasium was immediately silenced by his declaration, but almost all the sophomores soon started screaming with joy and became rowdy. Maybe there was a battle between the second years and the third years that we didn't know about. It was an event that made me feel that way.

(Intro End)

(Part 1)

One such event ended, and after school on a certain day, it was now the middle of the second semester.

My surroundings began to change little by little. Class D passed the uninhabited islands and sports festivals at a slow pace, but we began to have unity as a class. Everyone's small circle of friends gradually expanded, and the people who thought they couldn't get along were getting better at handling one another.

Everyone's attitude towards classes has also significantly improved. In the past, Class D had a problem with students arriving late, sleeping in class, talking during lessons, and perpetrating all kinds of unrest. In this regard, Sudō especially showed changes.

After the sports festival, although the number of days since then is still relatively small, it's clear that his general attitude towards school has improved. Occasionally he can be seen a bit drowsy in class, but that is probably due to the impact of his intense practice in the basketball club. Even if he is behind on sleep, he always takes the time to write notes. This was because it's necessary for him to get his studies in order for the sake of Horikita and the future of the class. Perhaps her surveillance during class has had a part in things as well.

His violent attitude that he had with his friends Ike and Yamauchi had become more gentle.

He didn't want his beloved Horikita's opinion of him to worsen by letting her witness him shamefully rampaging about. I'm guessing it was mostly this that motivated him to change.

In short, Sudō is growing steadily and he has begun to gain a better reputation amongst his classmates.

At the same time, there were changes not only in Sudō's reputation, but also with my own.

Whether that's a good or bad thing, however, is hard to say.

"Are you alone?"

As I was sorting out the situation, I was called out to from the seat beside me.

"Is it bad to be alone?"

My next-door neighbor, Horikita, seemed to chuckle. I stared at her blankly.

"Your dearest friends, Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun. They've been inviting you along much less often."

"Is that so?"

The fact that she always tends to go to the extremes reveals the bad parts of her personality.

"Ara, my mistake. At lunch you seem to be alone these days. After school as well as you can see."

We watched as Ike and Yamauchi left the classroom with The Professor. Are they heading to Keyaki Mall together?

(Note: The Professor is Hideo Sotomura's nickname.)

I had thought I appeared to be as calm as the Buddha, but Horikita seemed to see through everything.

Right. This would be part of the changes with my own reputation. After the sports festival, It's been uncommon for me to be invited out by the two people who I had gotten closest to. No, it is more like they have completely ignored me.

"No way. They thought you were all birds of a feather, a bunch of useless students, so you stuck together. But you were actually hiding a lot of physical strength from them."

"What is high physical strength? It's only that my feet are a bit faster, at best."

"But your footwork is fast, especially for a student. It's very fast. Besides, they've also probably started noticing other odd occurrences. They probably noticed that your measurement for grip strength was higher than average. You should know right? People have a basic tendency to hate others for being excellent, and your situation is that you've been hiding your excellence."

I know such a thing goes without saying. However, I also have to admit that I don't have a clear understanding of what counts as average. That I had believed that I was "just running a bit fast" was the truth.

"Enjoy your solitary life."

Horikita gave a sarcastic look before leaving the classroom, her long hair flowing.

Despite being solitary herself, her commanding manner was at least a little respectable.

As I saw her off, Karuizawa, who was still in the classroom, threw an indescribable glance in my direction. But as soon as our eyes met, she looked away naturally as if she never had any intention of looking my way in the first place. There was obviously some kind of meaning behind this look, but she followed Horikita out of the classroom without revealing anything in particular. The short length of her gently fluttering skirt was on my mind as it was a bit shorter than the rest of the girls. Though a simple one or two centimeters are easily within the margin of error, they are in fact a whole world apart.

"How's she... well, it's okay."

"Hey, hey, Ayanokōji-kun."

As I was thinking about what to do, an unexpected visitor appeared beside me.

She was the same type of hot girl as Karuizawa. Satō... I don't remember what her first name was. She is a very nice girl who had been friendly with Ike and Yamauchi in their group chat in the past. I also participated in their group chats, but we had almost no mutual interests.

Although she was a classmate, she was one I barely spoke to.

She's a girl who wanted to be close to boys and feels as popular as Kushida is with girls, but she wasn't as popular with the opposite sex.

Ike had said that she looks very bitchy and must be accustomed to men, so he had rejected her. What a complicated man's heart.

As far as the timing of the visit was concerned, she might have been waiting for me to be alone.

Satō looked around the room nervously.

"What's the matter?"

In the face of strange circumstances, I can only ask such questions.

"Yes, well. It's a bit."

She wasn't making herself quite clear. Unfortunately, I couldn't speculate on the content.

I was too lacking in information about the student Satō.

"Well, how can I put it? Can I borrow some time? I have something to say."

This was rather strange. I tightened my guard a little, but I'm not brave enough to refuse an offer. It is easier to gather enough courage to accept than

to gather the courage to refuse.

"It's a little inconvenient here, is it alright if we go somewhere else?"

Before I answered, Satō seemed to predict that I would not refuse, and offered to change places. I obeyed her and followed behind her.

"Ah..."

As I was about to leave the classroom, Sakura made a sound as if trying to say something, but nothing came out and she ended up turning away.

We went out of the hallway to the liaison corridor connection to the gymnasium. For the rest of the day after lunch, it would be crowded because the students who played and practiced in the gymnasium would use this communication corridor to move about. But now everyone is probably eating lunch, so this is one of the least populated areas. It might be the ideal place to talk about things.

It appears Satō did not particularly want to meet other people. She stopped and then turned around.

"I'm going to ask you something a little strange... Ayanokōji-kun, is there someone you're currently dating?"

"Er, what does that mean?"

"Well... literally speaking, it means having a girlfriend... how about that?"

If I had been asked if to choose between a “yes” option, and a “no” option, I would not have had the capacity to answer anything other than "no."

Saying that was like stressing how unpopular I was, and although I felt reluctant to do so, there was no use lying, so I answered her honestly.

"No..."

"Hmm, I see... Can I take that as though you're looking for a girlfriend?"

She did not look down on me, nor pity me, but instead showed a happy little smile.

At this point, I began to understand how things were going.

Was this a trap with the goal of framing me? I was on guard, but there were no signs of someone hiding nearby. Of course, we haven't been followed since the classroom either.

So, Either Satō herself, or a friend of hers, seem to think that I'm decent boyfriend material. Why all of a sudden at this point in time?

Does this have to do with how Horikita was able to conclude that I have high physical ability?

"If you'd like to start with just being friends -- well... would you exchange phone numbers with me?"

It seems that it's not a friend of hers she's asking for, Satō herself seems to be the one that's interested.

It never occurred to me that the day of a girl's request would actually come.

This was like the act before the confession.

"Anyway, I get it."

I can't find any reason to refuse her request to exchange our phone numbers.



Getting into a relationship would be a matter of leaps and bounds into the future. As of now, I'm only being asked to exchange phone numbers.

"Well, that's that."

The mobile phone shows the completed contact registration page. To increase my number of girls' contacts is a happy thing.

After this brief interaction with Satō, there was a strange tranquility in the atmosphere.

"I'm asking a question that's a bit awkward. Why are you suddenly asking me for my contact information?"

Satō blushed a little and didn't open her eyes.

"Ask me why... During the relay of the sports festival... Should I say you were very cool? Or should I say you've been so close-by, and I haven't noticed you at all? I had thought the best guy in the class was Hirata-kun, but he is Karuizawa-san's boyfriend, so he's out of the question."

As she finished saying this, she opened her eyes and looked up at me, and awkwardly adjusted what she had said.

"Ah... should I say that I don't think you are worse than Hirata-kun? To be honest, after I got a closer look, you seem to be more handsome than Hirata-kun. You also look really reliable and gentle... That's all!"

Perhaps the feeling of shame had swelled up in her, as the I couldn't hear the last part very well, and Satō inevitably left like the wind. My thoughts couldn't keep up with what had happened with her, so I stood still.

I was in an unexpected situation at an unexpected place with an unexpected person. Although nobody knows what the future holds, no way did I expect this to actually happen. What am I supposed to do about this? I feel neither negative or positive about Satō, only considering her as an ordinary classmate. Does this mean that the right thing to do is to refuse her confession?

No, she didn't say she wanted to be with me or that she liked me. I was just asked about my relationship status and was asked for contact information. Even if I assume her intentions a bit, I was only asked to become friends with her and to exchange contacts. If I refuse her confession, perhaps she will spit at me, saying I misunderstood something. That would be very embarrassing.

Being a bystander to a confession or being confessed to is totally fine, but when you yourself become the target of either of them, it just becomes troublesome. Now I understand how Sakura was feeling before being confessed to by Yamauchi.

While I was returning to the classroom, pondering about the complicated situation, I ran into Katsuragi and Yahiko of Class A.

I thought that there was no need to talk, but Katsuragi stopped and said to Yahiko:

"I'm sorry, go on ahead. I have something to say to Ayanokōji-kun."

Yahiko took up his guard, but because it was the instructions of Katsuragi, he immediately nodded his head and left.

"Horikita doesn't seem to be with you."

"We don't always stay together."

What should I say? Compared to speaking with girls, talking with boys is really easy.

Considering this, I feel like an idiot for struggling to make friends.

"That's true. To be honest, I was surprised by the relay race at the sports festival. It's probably something no one else in the school would have expected."

The topic of the conversation would, of course, be this. I was not surprised at all, and said indifferently:

"Class D won't always continue to be the losers."

"That's fine, but most of the students in Class D looked surprised as well. As long as their reactions weren't an act, then there seems to be a limit to the number of people who knew how fast you can run."

Katsuragi is skilled... He's sharp to have observed his surroundings so well in that turmoil.

Most people would have only paid attention to myself and the student council president. He not only paid attention to his own class but carefully observed the other classes as well.

"You are free to imagine what you will, but I'm not going to say anything."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not trying to get anything out of you."

"If it's a hostile class, don't you want as much information as you can get? Or, from the point of view of Class A, do you not see Class D as an adversary?"

Katsuragi gave a slightly vexed expression and took a few steps forward, stopping at the window. His gaze shifted towards the outside.

"I'm being overworked with all sorts of tricky problems at this time. I simply don't have the luxury to pay attention to other classes."

"You told Horikita to pay attention to Ryūen."

I only spoke information that I knew to Katsuragi.

"That guy always moves while disregarding his image for the sake of winning. He does whatever it takes to come out on top, even if he has to utilize things like intimidation and violence."

However, Katsuragi should not just be wary of Ryūen. It would be better to say that he should be wary of Sakayanagi who was lurking in Class A. Despite that, I deliberately did not bring that up.

Sakayanagi is a student who knows my past and is full of mysteries. If I don't handle the situation carefully, I'll only get bitten by the snake.

"Intimidation and violence? It would be dangerous if the school found out about it."

"He is the type of person who will do that kind of thing skillfully and covertly. Please continue to urge Horikita to not look down on him. Although this all might seem as though I'm helping an enemy and make you wary, Ryūen is a common enemy of Class A, Class B, and Class D."

It is true that Class C is actively fighting against all the other classes. However, there is evidence that Katsuragi and Ryūen had previously joined forces with one another. I'm not sure if I can believe him unconditionally.

As I think of this, Katsuragi seems to feel my distrust.

"You don't believe me?"

Due to his concern, I decided to dig a little deeper into what he knows.

"To be honest, I can't believe you entirely. It's hard for me to decide if I want to tell Horikita what you said. I can't tell you the source, but there are rumors that you were in partnership with Ryūen. Are these just rumors?"

"...Where did you hear that? No... There is no need to delve into that."

Katsuragi seemed to come to an answer right away. He did not lose his composure and continued:

"I regret it now. Although it was a momentary feeling and there was no leeway, I really shouldn't have taken the risk and involved myself with him. That's why I want you to take this advice. If you become involved with that guy, you'll be damned."

I don't know what the pros and cons were, but Katsuragi should have experienced it himself. The credibility of his words isn't guaranteed, but his request is still inexplicably persuasive.

"I knew right from the start that there was a risk in joining forces with that guy."

"Then what's the value in accepting your proposal to join forces against him?"

Katsuragi laughed to himself.

I thought it was unnecessary, but there was no calmness in Katsuragi's face. He shouldn't have been anxious or upset by my question, so I decided to dig even further.

"I know you are working to stop Ryūen, but that problem should belong to Class A and Class B. I saw the public class points that were displayed at the start of October."

Katsuragi shut his mouth, it seems that he is indifferent on the matter.

After the end of the uninhabited island test, Class A had their class points increase to 1,124. It was a positive situation for them at first, but there was a significant loss of points during the second special examination and the sports festival, taking Class A down to 874. In contrast, Class B wasn't that far behind, sitting at 753. Apart from having started at the same level, this was the closest gap between any of the classes at present time.

To supplement this, Class C was currently at 542, while Class D has 262.

"I really can only admit that this is not a very good state for Class A to be in. I was fooled by the school structure. My inability to perfectly understand the system of class points is also a factor."

He did not mention the subject of Sakayanagi carelessly.

Sakayanagi aside, as Katsuragi had said, it is also true that the school has a misleading point system.

The system seems simple, but unexpectedly there are many difficult to understand and unclear points being rewarded and removed.

In retrospect, it should have been easy to spot. Immediately after admission, the school conducted a rigorous review of lateness, absenteeism, and class attitude. In fact, our Class D was so affected that we lost all the class points we started out with at once, an experience that remains fresh in my memory.

Now, however, class attitude and so on do not reflect the increase or decrease with points as much.

Of course, students across all of the class had begun to take classes seriously, but I'm not certain that the penalty deductions have completely disappeared.

Now that I think about it, that might have been the original "Special Exam".

"I was born in the countryside and went to a local middle school. This place is very different from the high school life I always imagined."

After Katsuragi had said so, he clammed up a bit out of frustration.

"Although we all know this, this school is an incomprehensible and incredibly structured place. I have recently felt it again. Students of the same grade should be friendly to each other and should never be hostile to one another."

There is no doubt that this is different from a normal school life. The school had created a fine-tuned system that discourages students from getting along with students from other classes. It can also be said that the school is constructed based on competition. Depending on the situation, there will be cases where mutual hatred eventually leads to conflict. This is just the kind of school we go to.

In the same way, a system like this causes unity in one's own class to increase significantly.

Well, whether this class unity exists for any other class other than Class B is doubtful.

Class D has had a number of individual actions happen that go against the concept of unity, Class C is effectively run as if it was a dictatorship, and Class A is divided between two competing factions in an all-out power struggle. Overall, the topic of unity is a difficult situation for most of the first year students.

"Are you not wavering, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Honestly, not at all. It doesn't affect my judgment of how good or bad this school is. If the goal of reaching or maintaining Class A is put aside, this is definitely a charming and moving school. With only a certain amount of hard work, students don't have to worry about things like food and clothing. We even get money to spend on entertainment because of the points the school pays. Everything in the school is impeccably well prepared and thought out."

This is an idea shared by all of the students living in this school. As long as we don't desire to live like gods, no one would not welcome the current environment. Katsuragi is unable to refute this as well.

"I agree. If there is something to be disgruntled about, it is that the environment is too perfect. I don't think this is the way a high school student's life should be experienced. Students at this school didn't pass a particularly difficult test or anything... It's all just nonsense. Regardless, please tell Horikita about the threat that Ryūen poses."

I was advised by the reticent man and promised that I would communicate this to Horikita.

In fact, Ryūen was already launching a solid attack on Class D in an attempt to defeat us.

“You also just want to live peacefully too? The worries never seem to end... for both of us.”

I couldn't help but murmur.

(Part 1 End)

(Part 2)

That night, while I was relaxing in my room, Karuizawa called. We had exchanged contact information before, but I was still a little surprised to hear from her for the first time.

"I have something to ask you."

After answering the phone and putting it by my ear, Karuizawa said immediately:

"If I can answer. That should be fine."

"You've been confessed to by Satō, haven't you?"

I became tongue-tied at the unexpected question. How could she know that?

"Let me begin by saying that there are many girls in the class who already know."

"How quickly does your news network spread information? It's faster than the Internet. Who's the source of this information?"

"What do you mean who? The source is Satō herself. I was told in advance that she was planning to confess today."

Is it like insider trading or something? No, that doesn't seem right...

"Is that why you were looking at me earlier today?"

"...Did you really notice?"

"Who confesses to who is nobody else's concern, why do you report that kind of thing to one another?"

"Because girls are like that. It's troublesome to get in touch with one another after it happens."

Is that what it's like to want to write your name on your possessions?

Boys have a similar phenomenon, so maybe it's not inconceivable...

Even so, there's something I don't understand.

"If there's that much competition for the same person... Wouldn't it be better if you don't make a declaration to other girls since the outcome will be the same?"

"It's totally different. It's annoying if you suddenly declare that you're in a relationship. Letting others know ahead of time shows that everything is fine. Regardless, I'd like to ask what answer you gave her."

No, it's nerve-racking to be asked that kind of thing.

"No matter what my answer was, it has nothing to do with you."

"Well, it doesn't matter..... but you can't say it's irrelevant. You threatened me and made me do a lot of things for you, so I might end up getting caught. The girl's information network is very wide. If rumors were to spread, it will be very nerve-racking for me. I'll be at an increased risk of getting involved in trouble. Do you understand?"

In other words, when Satō and I talk, there is a chance that information on Karuizawa will come to light and put her at risk. Alternatively, I could only care about Satō, and neglect to protect Karuizawa. Through some strange system of logic, she had managed to think of this kind of thing. No matter how I look at it, it is obvious that she's thinking about this way too much.

It seemed to make sense, but it really didn't pass for sound logic. Karuizawa's appearance, words, and actions were inconsistent with the theoretical thinking she would discreetly take part in, but this time she was kinda forcing it a bit too much.

"You don't have to worry about it anyway."

"Does that mean you're planning to accept the confession?"

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"You are saying it alright. Since you don't outright deny it you know. Ah-ah, I somehow think I can see through you right? Making use of that confession, you're probably just thinking of some perverted thoughts anyway right? Men are just that kind of creature after all."

Her ideas jumped in an exaggerated way. This is like a parent feeling so proud of their child winning for first place in a sporting event, that they proclaim to other parents that their child is ensured to become an Olympic athlete in the future.

"Even if men are that kind of creature, at least for now I don't have those type of feelings."

"Prove it. Explain to me the reason for your refusal."

"Prove? It wasn't even a confession. She just said she wanted to be friends and we exchanged contact information."

"...I see. It turned out to be that kind of feeling."

Why do I have to say such things to Karuizawa? It's so embarrassing.

"It's not a question of accepting a confession at all. It's simply ended with an exchange of phone numbers."

"Hmm..... Well, that's where we'll leave things for today."

Karuizawa's attitude was very lofty.

Since I've got her on the phone, I'm going to get this thing settled.

"I want to ask you something now. You haven't had any interaction with those girls from Class C since the cruise, correct?"

"...Well, yeah, it hasn't been an issue. At least for now."

Her tone dropped a notch or two. For Karuizawa, this was an event she didn't want to bring up.

"I think I have taken the appropriate countermeasures, but if anything happens, you must let me know immediately. Even if you've been violently threatened to stay quiet, as long as you tell me, I'll fix the problem right away."

Karuizawa clearly held her breath over the phone. Were my words a bit too strong?

".....I know. What else should I say? If I'm not useful to you, it will become very troublesome for me..."

In order to survive in this school, Karuizawa must hold on to her current status no matter what.

To do this, she must first completely seal off the characters who know the truth about her.

However, it is impossible for the girls from Class C to understand the entire situation in the first place. The problem lies with Ryūen who works behind them. Depending on the situation, I may end up having to attack him instead.

No, I'm afraid that moment is almost certainly approaching.

"So, back on the topic of Satō, what do you intend to do? Because you exchanged contact information, there's a possibility things will move to the next level, right?"

"I'm taking a reserved attitude with it. At least, I don't know anything about Satō... I may never even be contacted by her."

"So, if Satō does stick around more than this, will you dump her?"

"What do you mean by dump her? We just exchanged contacts. Personally, I don't think I'm going to initiate contact."

I didn't have the guts to ask her out on a date, and I was not confident that I would be able to move the situation forward to a confession anyway.

"Yes, I see. So be it."

Looking somewhat satisfied, Karuizawa prepared to cut the call.

"Karuizawa."

"What?"

I thought maybe I wouldn't make it in time, but after calling out to her, the phone didn't hang up.

"Make sure to erase the records of our phone call from your cell phone."

"I've done that a long time ago. I even erase the emails."

"As expected. All right."

Even without instructions, Karuizawa seems to be doing a good job.

"If it's just these things, I'm going to hang up."

"Yeah."

I added in this statement to end the conversation and hung up the call.

To be honest, I was worried about whether I should say one more thing or

not, but I gave it up.

I judged that if we were to discuss our assumptions at this stage, it would only become a burden for Karuizawa.

Even if the time comes, if it is Karuizawa, she should be able to deal with it at the very least.

It looks like I will inevitably have to take action soon.

Name	Maya Satō (佐藤 麻耶, <i>Satō Maya</i>)	
Class	1st Year, Class D	
ID #	S01T004739	
Club	None	
Birthday	February 28th	
Assessment		
Academic Ability	D-	
Intellect	D-	
Judgement	D-	
Physical Ability	C	
Teamwork	C-	



Interviewer's Evaluation

During elementary school she was very earnest and had good grades, but after graduating to middle school, she began going and having fun with friends instead. During the first year and second year of middle school, she was absent in the majority of her classes. Although she changed during her third year of middle school, her current academic skills remain at a standstill. We hope she can display her characteristic energetic and cheerful personality to improve her skills.

Homeroom Teacher Records

She has the ability to establish contact with everybody, I hope she can use this as a weapon and establish friendships smoothly.

Chapter 2: Paper Shuffle

(Introduction)

One day, a heavy atmosphere hung over the class.

However, this atmosphere was by no means pessimistic. It was filled with just the right amount of tension.

The first to take this in was Class D's teacher, Chabashira-sensei.

"Please find your seats. All of you seem to have made plenty of preparations."

As soon as she walked into the classroom, the atmosphere quickly grew heavier and became more dignified.

Compared to before, the class we presented her with looked natural. In this respectful atmosphere, Chabashira-sensei didn't hide her surprise.

"Everyone looks rather serious. It's hard for me to believe that everyone here is part of Class D."

"That's because today is when you announce the results of the mid-term exam, right?"

Ike spoke with a slightly nervous look on his face. Chabashira-sensei responded with a sly smile.

“That’s exactly right. You’re required to drop out immediately if you fail your midterm or final exams. I’ve told you this before, so it should still be fresh in your memories. It’s natural to be nervous or anxious, but none of you even had the proper mentality until now. I'm glad to see all of you growing up.”

Chabashira-sensei commended her student’s new, never before seen attitude, but that doesn’t mean that our scores will be any better. The only real change has been to our mentalities.

As a matter of course, Chabashira-sensei dared to say this.

“However, you’ll need to be prepared for the consequences if you’ve failed. So now I'm going to post the midterm exam results. Make sure you don't mix up your name and score.”

The reason why she reminded us is precisely that this warning is genuine. If someone was unable to accept their scores and reacted violently, the school wouldn’t hesitate to respond harshly with ample evidence from the cameras watching the students installed in every classroom.

“Sure enough, I can see everyone’s test scores.”

“Of course. It's one of the rules of the school.”

Regardless of the students’ willingness to have their personal information displayed, the results for all the students in Class D were posted on the

blackboard. There's absolutely no privacy at all. The results are always revealed without reservation. Just as a salesman's performance chart is posted for the entire company, it reveals those at the top and those at the bottom.

In cases like these, the ones who stand out the most are those with particularly good or bad grades. Those who fall behind are the ones who will suffer and become subjected to selfish pressure and contempt from their surroundings.

“For all subjects, it's fine to consider the passing grade to be a score of 40 points or more. Those who do not meet this standard will be subjected to expulsion.”

The threshold for passing the midterms was almost the same as it was for previous exams, but the situation was a little bit different.

“The scores announced from now on will also reflect your results at the sports festivals. In terms of results, those who achieved high scores and found success at the festival attained a score exceeding 100 points. In these cases, the score will be treated as a full score.”

The ten students who achieved the worst results during the sports festival would have to take a 10 point deduction on their midterm exams. Class D's Sotomura had one of the worst performances in the entire grade, so he was one of the people who had to score 10 points higher in all subjects.

However, the students who didn't receive penalties such as Ike and Sudō still had very stiff expressions. A system of immediate expulsion due to a single failing mark places a heavy burden on all students both physically and mentally.

The students watched attentively as the test results were slowly posted onto the board.

However, Horikita showed no impatience for seeing the scores.

“Oh!? Oh!? You’re kidding!?”

The ranking of the results began with the lowest score. In other words, everyone expected Sudō, who came in last during both the midterm and final exams of the first semester, to place in last once again this time around. However, the first name posted was "Haruki Yamauchi" along with his grades in various subjects. The next was "Ike Kanji", followed by Inogashira, Satō, and then Sotomura. Sotomura usually always placed a little bit low, but for him to drop this much was undoubtedly due to the influence of the penalty from the sports festival.

“What a crisis! Am I seriously in last place!?”

Fortunately, he was over 40 points in every subject, with his lowest score just barely passing with 43 points in English. His average score didn’t even reach 50 points. After receiving these results, Yamauchi felt the sensation of being dead for an instant. A substantial amount of cold sweat broke out on his face and neck.

Sudō’s scores were even more surprising. Until today, he had been consistently positioned at the very bottom of the class. However, with this exam, he moved up a total of 12 spots. Even when considering the points he earned from the sports festival, his accomplishments were obvious. This was shown by the look of surprise our classmates were giving him. His scores averaged out to 57 points.

“I’ve smashed my personal-record by so much in one go!!! Do you see it!? Furthermore, it almost averages out to 60 points!”

As soon as Sudō found his results, he shouted and stood up, dancing around happily.

“That score isn’t worth making a racket over. You’ve only been saved due to the sports festival. It's honestly a broken system if you ask me.”

“Oooh dammit...”

Sudō was shut down by Horikita’s harsh words. He quietly returned to his seat, a bit discouraged.

He was just like a loyal dog. Reacting to his master's orders immediately and carrying them out.

“Sudō even scored an average of 57 points... The effects of the study group are outstanding.”

Even with his worst subject, English. Sudō remarkably managed to score 52 points.

I heard that Horikita had once again taught Sudō and the others who were close to failing for this midterm exam. I wasn’t invited to take part in teaching them, but that’s only to be expected. From the perspective of other students, I don’t appear to be a particularly smart individual. Moreover, Horikita herself

should also be skeptical of my academic ability.

“The effect the study sessions have had are big indeed. If you are unprepared for a formal exam, it’s all but certain that you’ll fail it. However, this time the success is probably due to other factors. It was a major help that the midterm exam this time around was made up of relatively simple problems.”

“Maybe so.”

This midterm exam was no doubt a little bit easier than the usual exam. This is because there were several questions that I suspect the school to have put in by mistake. Based on this, it seems that Horikita isn’t concerned about the results of the midterms, because she was convinced that the study group had managed to pass the exam. In contrast, Yamauchi, who finished last, seemed unable to completely hide his frustration at losing to Sudō by such a large margin. Horikita taught all of the students who were afraid of failing equally the same as she had before, but Sudō had taken his time to study one-on-one with her even during his days off. The power of love is a terrifying thing. Little by little, Sudō’s academic ability seemed to be improving.

“You're averaging 64 points. How very ordinary. Why don’t you give up this farce and get serious?”

“That’s the best I could do.”

Since I usually place in the vicinity of 50 points, if I was to suddenly score 100 points, I’d inevitably be creating new issues to deal with.

It's just a matter of doing it in a slow and steady way.

Having said that, it should be alright for me to raise my score higher next time, considering the jump Sudō made.

“I know you're playing the fool here, it's impossible for me to listen to anything you have to say on the matter anymore.”

“I'm not sure if you've ever listened to me in the first place.”

“That's true.”

Honestly... and then she goes and agrees with me.

That said, even though it was the midterm exams, the questions were relatively simple, so a plethora of perfect scores composed the final names on the results. Other classes must have also gotten very high marks on this exam.

“As you can see, the number of people who've dropped out due to this exam is zero. Everyone overcame this exam without any issues.”

Chabashira-sensei was upfront with her praise for her students. It appears that there was no need to criticize us, as her attitude reserved.

“Obviously. I'm looking forward to next month's personal points, sensei!”

With his elbows on his desk, Sudō got into the swing of things and spoke confidently.

Chabashira-sensei responds to his attitude with tolerance, without changing her smile.

“Well, there were no problems in particular during the sports festival, so it should be nice to expect some amount of private points in November. In the three years since I’ve arrived at this school, I have never seen a Class D that’s managed to sustain zero dropouts for as long as you have. Well done.”

Chabashira-sensei praised the class. Until today, she had never shown this type of attitude to us. Because of this, many of the students were very hesitant to accept this rare situation for what it was.

“Being praised by you makes me feel uncomfortable.”

Those who are seldom praised are typically more embarrassed when they receive it.

Horikita, however, showed no signs of carelessness. Of course, it was great that nobody failed, but she knew that Chabashira-sensei wasn’t the type of person who would end the conversation with praise.

The more gentle her attitude, the weirder the situation became.

Her tied ponytail swayed charmingly as she quietly began to move.

Sensei walked a lap around the classroom, slowly passing between the rows of desks.

When she arrived at Ike's seat, Chabashira-sensei stopped and said:

"You've overcome one exam without incident, so I'll ask you again, what do you think of this school? I'd like to hear your evaluation."

"Well... It's a good school. You can get a lot of spending money if everything goes well for you. The food and everything is delicious and the rooms are beautiful."

And then he continued, counting off with his fingers.

"There are games for sale, movies and karaoke, and the girls are cute..."

That last reason seems to be unrelated to the school itself.

"Uhm... did I say something wrong?"

No longer able to bear her silence any longer, Ike looked up at Chabashira-sensei and raised a question.

"No. From a student's point of view, this school definitely provides a wonderful environment. Even from my point of view as a teacher, I also feel this school provides a lot of unimaginably good benefits to its students. It all really feels like it falls outside the realm of common sense."

Sensei began to move again, passed the seat at the end of the row, and wrapped around over to my side of the classroom.

It gave me the feeling that I was about to be given a question in front of the class. Can you please not ask something of me?

Fortunately, my wish came true as Chabashira-sensei stopped before Hirata's desk instead.

"Hirata, have you gotten used to the school?"

"Yes. I've made a lot of friends and I'm living a fulfilling campus life."

Hirata did well to give an exemplary, and reliable response.

"Don't you feel uneasy with the risk of having to drop out if you make a single mistake?"

"Each time that risk comes back up, I'm going to get through it together with the entire class."

Hirata, who always thinks of his classmates, didn't hesitate with his response.

After she finished going around the classroom, Chabashira-sensei returned to the podium.

She seemed to be trying to confirm something, but I couldn't determine what it was.

If I had to make a guess, she may have wanted to know more about the morale and atmosphere of the class. Was it to see whether or not we can confront the trials that have yet to come?

“As I’m sure you all know, there will be an eight-subject quiz next week as part of the second semester’s final exam. I think some of you have already started studying for the exam, but I’ll remind everyone again.”

“Eh!? I’m just now feeling relieved that the midterm exam is over! Another test!?”

The cold season has begun, and students who aren’t adept at studying will only continue to suffer from here. There will be a swift barrage of tests in the near future that students will not be able to escape. In particular, the interval between the second-semester exams is a short one.

“There’s a week left until the quiz!? I haven’t heard anything about this!”

Despite Ike’s shouting, the teachers of each subject had been constantly informing us about the upcoming quiz. I couldn’t help but feel like sighing at his ignorance of the situation.

“Saying that you haven’t heard of it isn’t going to work, I’d love to tell you otherwise, but I can’t. Regardless, don’t worry too much about it, Ike.”

Chabashira-sensei smiled as if she was extending a thread of salvation to him.

However, we’re all learning to know better than to think it’s done purely out of kindness.

“Really sensei? So I can take it easy then!? Booyah!”

Learning..... at least we should be. Chabashira-sensei took her eyes off Ike and continued:

“First of all, the quiz will have 100 questions for a total of 100 points, but the subject matter of the quizzes will be at the same level as what is expected of a third-year middle school student. That is to say, this quiz will serve as a means for us to confirm whether you remember your foundations or not. Moreover, like the mock exam from the first semester, these quizzes will not have any influence on your grades. Even if you score a 0 or a 100, it doesn’t matter. It will be used solely to determine your current ability.”

“Oh! Ooooh! Are you serious!? Yesss!”

“However- Of course I’m going to tell you that this quiz is certainly not meaningless. Why? Because the results of this quiz will have a large influence over the upcoming final exam.”

Should I say it was obvious or something?

The sports festival has already ended, so the next special test is going to begin soon.

“What do you mean by influence? Tell us in a way that we can understand.”

I understand why Sudō wants to ask for more information. Chabashira-sensei

dares put off touching upon the true matter at hand in order to stir up anxiousness from the class.

“It would be nice to explain it to you in a way that makes it easy for you to understand, Sudō. The school has stipulated that the results of this quiz will be used as a basis to pair you up with someone else in the class.”

“Pair?”

Hirata expressed his doubt over the word that seemed the most out of place.

“That's right. The pairing created from the quiz will share the same fate and challenge the final exams together. The exam will be worth 100 points for each of the 8 subjects, and each subject will have 50 questions, for an overall total of 400 questions. This time around, there will also be two ways to fail the exam. The first way is similar to what all of you have already experienced. All subjects will have a minimum standard of 60 points. If the final grade your pair gets on any one subject is under 60 points, then both members of the pair will drop out of school. This 60 point standard is the combined total of each of the two partners. As an example, if Ike and Hirata are a pair, even if Ike gets a score of zero on one subject, as long as Hirata gets a 60, neither of the two will be required to drop out.”

A voice of shock leaked out of one of the students. It appears that as long as you get a reliable partner, this will be a fairly easy test.

However, what's the second way to fail the final exam?

Chabashira-sensei ignored the students' reactions and explained the other

means of failing the final exam.

“The new criteria that you’ll have to overcome to avoid expulsion is a cumulative score requirement. Even if you get above 60 points in all eight subjects, if your cumulative score is below this second standard, both partners will be expelled.”

“For this requirement, is it based on the collective total between both members of the pair?”

“That’s right. The cumulative score will be determined by the total score of both members of the pair. The school hasn’t figured out the exact number for the minimum standard that the cumulative score will need, but in previous years the score was around 700 points.”

Both members of a pair will share their points and drop out together as well. Is this what she meant by sharing the same fate?

For 700 points, since there are 16 total subjects between two people, it will be necessary to achieve a minimum average of 43.75 points on each subject.

Even students with recognized academic excellence, such as Horikita or Yukimura, are at risk depending on who they’re matched with.

“You said the school hasn’t decided on the exact borderline that the cumulative score is required to be above yet, but why is that?”

“Don’t be so hasty Hirata. I’ll explain the borderline later. The final exam will be divided into two days, where you take four subjects each day. I’ll let you

know the order of the subjects later as well. In the event of an absence due to poor physical condition, the school will inquire about the legitimacy of the absence. If it is confirmed that the student had no other alternative, they will be given points based on rough estimates of their past exams. However, if the reason for the absence isn't satisfactory, the absentee tester will be given a score of zero for all tests they miss."

In other words, this is an absolutely inescapable test. The school even intends to regulate something like our physical conditions.

"Still, you're starting to look a little bit like a true student of this school. In the past, you would have screamed when you heard the rules of this exam."

"...Well, I've grown accustomed to it. I've had to do all kinds of things so far."

There was scarcely any surprise in Ike's response. He seemed to have a little confidence in himself.

"That's a confident statement, Ike. However, there are probably quite a few of you who feel the same way. Therefore, I'm going to give you all a single piece of advice. It's best not to think that you've mastered everything about this school just because you've gotten past the first semester of the first year. In the future, all of you will have to overcome countless exams that are far harder than this one will be."

"P-please don't say such horrible things, sensei."

One of the girls said, frightened by her advice.

“Since it’s a fact, it can’t be helped. However, this special test..... commonly known as ‘Paper Shuffle’, usually results in one or two groups of dropouts on an average year. Most of them tend to be students from Class D. This isn’t a threat, I’m simply reciting facts.”

Until this point, the class had still been somewhat optimistic, but now the atmosphere grew tense.

The arrival of a new special test. But what does she mean by ‘Paper Shuffle’?

“Pairs that fall below the borderline will be expelled without exception. If you think my speech is just a mere threat, you’re free to ask the senior students. You should have already begun making loose connections with them by now.”

However, even though the rules of the exam seem horrific, isn’t it a bit strange that on average only one or two groups of students have dropped out in the previous years? Depending on the pairings, the exam could turn out to be devastating.

Basically, it’s like this right?

“Finally, I’ll specify the penalties for the formal examination. Although it shouldn’t need to be said, cheating is prohibited during the examination. Cheaters will be immediately disqualified and expelled from school together with their partner. This is not limited to this examination, it also applies to all midterm and final examinations.”

Cheating is equivalent to dropping out of school. At first glance, this may seem like a severe punishment. If this was an ordinary high school, the

punishment would be a zero on the final exams along with some admonition, or at most, suspension. However, since failing the exam will immediately get you expelled anyways, it's inevitable that cheating would be dealt with the same way. The significance of this special warning is to prevent students from getting ahead of themselves and making mistakes. I'll accept this as Chabashira-sensei's advice.

However, the problem for this exam is the pairing system.

"After I receive the results of the quiz, I will inform you about the decision method for the pairings."

Immediately after hearing this, I quietly grabbed hold of my pen. The person sitting next to me grabbed her pen at almost the same time and began to record the midterm results displayed on the blackboard.

I cast a glance at the situation and placed my pen back on the desk.

I immediately felt how unnecessary my actions were.

"After the quiz, is it? If you get matched with the person in last place, wouldn't you be in big trouble?"

"Ugh! I'm humiliated by Ken! I'll study and absolutely change this!"

"Don't force yourself. You're just talking big. There's still so much more to come from my studies."

Yamauchi was blown away with regret as he slouched down into his desk in agony. Although Sudō also spoke big, as long as Horikita was there, he seemed to be willing to continue studying endlessly, and for exactly that reason his words were somewhat convincing.

Well, that's not what's important here. The school doesn't intend to teach us how the pairs are decided at the present time. That is, there's a high chance that there's something that we can learn that will influence who we're matched with. Undoubtedly, some of the students who have taken part in the special and written exams should have noticed this by now, including Horikita who was writing next to me.

"There's one more thing. The school will ask you to consider this final exam from yet another perspective."

"There's one more thing we need to do?"

As the class was slightly upset, Hirata responds as if to summarize the situation.

"Yes. First of all, you will be asked to brainstorm and write your own final exam questions. The questions you write will be the questions on the final of one of the other three classes. This is to say, you will have to launch an 'attack' against one of the other classes, and the class that intercepts this attack will have to 'defend'. The school will compare the overall grades on the finals between the two classes, and the class who wins will receive a total of 50 Class Points from the losing class."

In other words, in order for a pair to avoid failing, they have to score above a 60 in all subjects, as well as collectively exceed a total score of around 700

points. Furthermore, as a class, we have to achieve an overall score higher than the classes that we're competing against.

"Depending on the combination, is it possible for there to be a gap in the private points? Let's say Class A attacks Class B and Class D attacks Class A. Assuming that Class A successfully manages to attack and defend, they will get a total of 100 Class Points. But if Class A attacks Class D and Class D attacks Class A, it would only be a trade-off of 50 Class Points, right?"

"There are clear rules on this. In the case of a direct confrontation, the number of Class Points being wagered will change to 100, so don't worry. It's rare, but if the overall grades of each class end up being the same, it ends as a draw. In which case, there won't be any change in the overall number of points."

"We have to come up with problems and write out questions for the students of other classes..... I've never heard of such a thing. How will this be executed? If someone was to make their questions impossible to answer, I think the test will end up being very difficult but....."

"Oh, yeah! Such as stuff we haven't been taught, or nonsense trap questions! That's impossible!"

Ike and the others were holding up their hands in defeat.

"Of course, it will certainly end up that way if it was all left up to the students. For this reason, the questions you create will be strictly and fairly checked by our teachers. If there are problems that fall beyond the scope of the material, or can not be answered with what is provided in the question, we will require that you amend it. Through a system of constant revision of unacceptable

questions, we will ensure that everyone creates fair questions. It won't be anything like the situation you're concerned about. Ike, does this make sense to you?"

"Um, somewhat..."

It's easy to say, but it isn't that simple.

"Making 400 questions... that seems like it's going to be a pretty tight schedule."

There is about a month left until the exam begins. One person would have to make ten to fifteen questions a day. Although it should be said that they will need to be prepared even faster than that so we'll have time to make corrections when the school doesn't accept some of the questions. After you take into account Class D's 'shortcomings', the next month begins to look quite bleak. Hirata seems to understand this as well, and looked like he was losing his bearings a little.

"In the event that the questions and answers are not completed in time, relief measures will be implemented for you. Our own pre-made questions will be used after the deadline. However, please note that that difficulty of the questions prepared by the school will be lower."

The so-called relief measures sound nice, but in reality, it would be like admitting defeat.

At all costs, we will need to create the questions and answers. In addition to their own studies, the leaders of each class have to think about the questions

they'll give to the other classes. It's likely that this will be a very hard exam.

"When it comes to creating your questions, you are free to consult students in other classes and school years, utilize the internet, consult your teacher, or decide amongst yourselves. There are no particular limitations. As long as it is a question the school allows, difficult or easy, we do not care about the content."

"The final exam that we have to challenge, of course, will be one that another class will create for us, right?"

"That's true. You're probably curious about how the class you're attacking is chosen, but the method for determining that is easy to understand. A student simply needs to nominate your desired class and I will report it to the school. If and when there's more than one nomination for the same class, the school will call upon a representative and you'll draw lots. In turn, if there is no overlap, your nomination is accepted and that's the class you'll be writing questions for. I'll hear your nomination the day before the quiz next week. You should think carefully about your decision until then."

The final exam is usually about facing the school, but this time it's essentially a one-on-one fight with another class?

In this way, complex mechanisms are involved in this exam, in addition to what exactly the point boundary for each pair is.

"That's it for the preliminary explanation of the quiz and final exam. The rest is up to you to think about."

Chabashira-sensei summed it up this way, and with that, today's class came to

an end.

(Intro End)

(Part 1)

“I'm going to start a meeting, Ayanokōji-kun. Can you get Hirata-kun over here for me?”

Horikita stood up and said this immediately after the special test was announced.

“I understand.”

I answered briefly, then approached Hirata. Horikita went to Sudō at the same time. As of now, Class D has gradually started receiving attention from the other classes.

There have been changes for me as well.

I had been able to stick in the background before, but now I've made a name for myself by running in the relay race in the sports festival. I'll undoubtedly be in the sights of Ryūen or Ichinose as they look for the presence behind Horikita.

So, what should I do about that?

Keep my distance away from Horikita? Suddenly straying away from her would obviously raise suspicions.

In that case, should I wait around as usual for the situation to pass? As long as I'm around Horikita, I'm bound to be suspected.

I guess in the end nothing will change even if I do something.

The other side will probably be ignorant of my true thoughts and over-interpret my actions on their own.

Then, I shall aim to return to how things were at the start of the year.

Horikita has only made a few friends so far, so there were many situations where getting involved with her was inevitable. However, that should be different in the future. Starting with Sudō, her contact with people such as Hirata and Karuizawa should gradually increase.

And as that happens, I can slowly fade into the background.

I do want to get on better terms with her, but I do not intend to be at the mercy Chabashira-sensei.

If they can go about handling the class on their own, my burden will naturally be lessened.

That's how I see it. Chabashira-sensei shouldn't be particularly attached to me being the one to cause Class D to rise. Logically, she should be satisfied with any student willing to take on the task.

As for why she did not hesitate to threaten me to reach Class A, I'm not interested in Chabashira-sensei's intentions.

However, now is not the time to let go of Horikita.

If I let go of the reins here, Class D will spiral out of control and even potentially collapse altogether. I'm going to gather people around Horikita before quietly fading out of the picture.

The important thing is the procedure, followed by preparation and results.

"It seems he will be coming soon."

I called out to Hirata, who was talking to a classmate, and then went back to my seat.

"Same thing on my end."

Sudō left to go to the bathroom. He was the first person out the door.

"So, what should we think of this test?"

Horikita asked prematurely before people would start to gather.

"We just need to listen to the words of Chabashira-sensei to understand it. This should be a more difficult test than previous ones. The standard that needs to be met to avoid failing is easy, but if our goal is to beat other classes, our total score will have to be pretty high. Plus, the pairing system is tricky. Add to that the fact that another class is going to write the test for us, and we can predict that the degree of difficulty will effectively double. It will be particularly challenging if we're up against a class that makes their questions more challenging than they need to be. Depending on how a question is phrased, even if the answers are the same, the response rate can change significantly."

"Yeah... this time it's not just about reading strategies, it's also about testing our ability to create problems."

It is impossible to come out ahead in this exam if we only teach students who are worried about failing, as we had with the midterms. Ideally, we would look to grasp the weaknesses of other classes, but it's doubtful that they would readily reveal those to us.

However, many of the things we have to do are the same as what we had to do for the midterms.

In that sense, this test could be considered less difficult than either of the summer special exams. Just as the sports festival tests the class's physical strength, this test can be said to be a test of the class's academic knowledge.

"If you can do something, you should do it. After all, we've been given hints."

"Well, I'm aware of that."

Horikita answered calmly and continued:

"You always pay attention to what the other person says and does. This school loves to hide hints in everything they tell us. The key facts that should be picked out from what Chabashira-sensei told us are that the results of these quizzes will not affect our grades, that the criteria for failing the overall grade has yet to be determined, and that who is chosen as our partner will be determined after the quizzes end.

I couldn't help but smile in the face of this perfect and delightful understanding.

Soon after, Hirata, who had been called over, came to meet with us.

"Thanks for waiting. This is to discuss our plans for the final exam, correct?"

He then calls over Karuizawa. Karuizawa stares at us with annoyance, but ultimately responds to his request and approaches Horikita.

"I'm sorry, I thought it would be better if we discussed this right away."

At the beginning of the school year, anyone would have been surprised to hear Horikita ask for anyone, but now that Horikita acted as a representative for the class, students had begun to take it naturally.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to start right away."

"What, here? I object. Since we're just going to be talking, let's go to Pallet. Shall we, Yōsuke?"

Karuizawa clasped Hirata's arm and pulled to indicate her presence. When I first met Karuizawa, she would often do things like this and act like a spoiled brat. Pallet, by the way, is a cafe on campus. It's a vibrant place where many female students gather during lunch break and after school. When I looked at Karuizawa, our eyes met for a moment. I don't remember saying anything in particular, but Karuizawa quickly detached from Hirata's arm, although she remained visibly irritated.

"We don't know where the enemy's eyes will be, but... oh well."

It would be easier for Horikita to move with the group than for her to challenge Karuizawa here. Although Horikita herself is not self-conscious, this part of her has grown.

"Well, can I join you?"

The one who said that was our classmate - Kushida Kikyō.

"Will it cause you any trouble...?"

"I'm fine with it. Kushida-san knows everything about the class. And considering the type of test the final exam is, I'd like to hear everyone's opinions on the matter first."

Karuizawa's position was that everything was OK, and answered first. So, what will Horikita do?

"Sure, Kushida-san. I was going to call for you sooner or later anyway."

Horikita agreed at once, as if she was agreeing with Karuizawa to avoid trouble.

"Could you three please head over there first? I'll settle my affairs here and then join you."

The three of them agreed without any particular objection, and left to the cafe.

"Is it alright to let her join us?"

Kushida is a valuable fighting force for Class D, but her relationship with Horikita is complicated. Although the details are only known by the two of them, it is difficult to guarantee that Kushida will not attempt to obstruct what we do.

Moreover, Class D was put into a crisis during the sports festival because of Kushida's betrayal.

"Wouldn't it be strange to refuse in a scene like that?"

That is true. Did Horikita really accept this though?

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Suzune."

"Never mind that. The venue for the discussion has changed. They're waiting for us at Pallet."

"Oh, so uh. I'm sorry, can I go to the club just to show my face? I just remembered that my seniors asked for me to attend. I think it'll be over in twenty or thirty minutes."

"I don't mind. Come and meet me as soon as you're done."

Sudō grinned, grabbed his backpack and hurried out of the classroom.

As she was late for the discussion, Horikita picked up her bag. I decided to head out as well.

"Then I'm going back home. Best of luck with everything."

"Wait a minute. You're invited to this as well. As an intermediary between Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san, you are indispensable. I don't have very much influence on them right now."

"...Of course it would be like this. Although you say you don't have very much influence, I think you can control the class smoothly to some extent. Besides, the final exam is the accumulation of these upcoming quizzes. You handled the midterm exam without my help with your study group."

As a matter of fact, she handled that entire situation on her own accord.

These quizzes are just one step away from that.

"If you only look at that point, maybe so. But if Kushida is there, it's a different story. This is an exception. And I have something to tell you first. Can I at least ask you to participate in today's discussion? Or, are you not interested in what she's up to?"

That statement was very sly. Honesty is the best way to answer something like this.

"It would be a lie to say I'm not interested."

She treats everyone in the class the same, so why is it that she's so hostile to Horikita?

For me, that is a very puzzling thing. I'm kind of interested in the situation.

"If you can accept that and attend today's discussion, then I'll tell you."

Horikita asserted. She seemed to have a reason for bringing it up at this moment.

"To be honest, I don't want to make a fuss about her past, but I think it's necessary to tell you first, so let me talk. Because I think the results should be useful to me. "

"I thought you weren't going to tell me about Kushida."

"On what basis do you think that?"

"You haven't said anything about Kushida so far, have you? It's probably better to say that I can't imagine you of all people getting involved in a hostile relationship with somebody. When did you become involved with Kushida?"

I squinted to confirm Horikita's expression. She was stiffer than I thought.

"I can't tell you here. Do you understand?"

Though no one was paying attention to our conversation, there are countless eyes and ears in the classroom.

"...I see. I guess I'll accompany you then."

I'm looking forward to a story worthy of this effort.

After we got out of the corridor and passed through the crowd, Horikita whispered:

"Where do you want me to start from?"

"From the beginning. Because all I know is that the two of you are not on good terms with one another."

And the dark side of Kushida. I want to know more about that. However, I have deliberately neglected to mention this because I don't know what Horikita

knows or plans to say.

"Let me tell you first, I don't know much about Kushida Kikyō. Where did you and Kushida-san meet in the first place?"

This is probably a matter of confirmation. Let me reply earnestly:

"On the bus."

"That's right. Like you, the first time I saw Kushida-san was on the bus on the day of admission."

I remember that matter now. There was an old woman who had to stand because there were no open seats. Kushida reached out to the old woman and tried to get other passengers to give up their seats. It was a good deed in itself, a kindness that no one would reproach. But unfortunately, I remember that nobody had decided to give up their seat until Kushida had put in quite a bit of effort in convincing someone to give theirs up. I also had had no intention to give my seat up, so the entire situation had a lasting impression on me.

"It would have had to be then if she had begun to hate you... but if it was that interaction, it would be needless to say that Kōenji, who had refused to give up his own seat even after a direct confrontation, would be a far better target for her hatred than someone who simply watched the situation go down. This isn't even considering that she would also hate me if that were the reason."

I didn't mean to say that Kushida liked me, but she only showed this unusually strong hostility to Horikita.

"I didn't know Kushida-san at the time. No, I did not remember it exactly."

"Does that mean that you and Kushida interacted before you met on the bus?"

"Well, she and I are from the same middle school. That school is in a totally different prefecture, and this is a very special high school. She probably never dreamed that there would be people from the same place as her."

"I see."

As I heard this, it solved a great mystery. Before I met them, the bond between Horikita and Kushida had already begun.

In that case, I can understand. That I couldn't understand before hearing this was inevitable.

"I thought of this after we held the study group in the first semester. My middle school was a big school with over one thousand students, and I don't remember ever being in the same class as Kushida-san."

I would not at all be surprised to learn that Horikita was also like this in her middle school days.

She should have made no friends, spending every day quietly indulging herself in her schoolwork.

"What kind of student was Kushida during middle school?"

We didn't go straight to Pallet. Because we judged that the conversation might take some time, we walked around the school for a bit. The farther away from the cafe that you get, the less populated the area is.

"Who knows. Like I just said, she and I didn't interact with each other. However, I can say that she was just as popular there as she is here, if not more so. In retrospect, she was certainly the centerpiece of her class during all kinds of events back then. She was a popular person, who was kind to everyone and always left a good impression. I don't think that she joined the student council, but she would definitely have been invited to join."

If she had held a position, Horikita would probably have remembered that she was in the same grade. Indeed, the Kushida I know has never held any position at all.

Perhaps, as Horikita testified, the perfect personality that Kushida demonstrates in high school is the same as the one she had in middle school.

The two seemed to have crossed paths, but in fact, they didn't. I can't solve the mystery of why Kushida was so disgusted by Horikita. The answer is probably hidden in the follow-up to this topic.

"I don't think she hates you because she can't be your friend."

It's not just a question of whether or not she can make one hundred friends. Even if it's Kushida, nobody had the means to become friends with the entire school population.

"Well, the key is what I'm going to say next. But you have to remember that this is just a rumor. The full truth is something only Kushida-san knows."

Horikita got to the point and began to speak seriously.

"Something happened as graduation was approaching near the end of February where a class broke apart."

"It wasn't the flu, was it?"

"Well, the rumors reached me immediately -- it was said that a certain school girl had caused a class breakdown, and that class did not return to its original condition until after I had already graduated."

"I don't even need to ask who that schoolgirl is, right?"

"It was Kushida-san. But I do not know the details as to how the class was driven to the point of collapse. I'm afraid the school is completely hiding the news as well. If the truth was made public, the credibility of the school would be reduced. Also, it would likely have an impact on the education process and the employment of faculty. Even so, the school couldn't contain the fire. Rumors inevitably began spreading among the students based on all kinds of speculations."

"Do you remember anything, even if it's just a rumor?"

I wanted to know what kind of situation it was. Horikita spoke as if remembering the past.

"As soon as the incident came to light, some students from my class were talking about it. They had said that the classroom was completely ruined and the blackboard and tables were covered with slanderous graffiti."

"To be covered with slanderous graffiti... Is it possible to conclude that Kushida was being bullied?"

"I don't know, there were too many rumors. Things like someone from the class was doing the bullying, or that she was bullying someone in the class herself. I also recall there being rumors of serious acts of violence, but those are not as clear."

In short, there seemed to be countless rumors going around.

"But I stopped hearing those rumors in the blink of an eye. It became impossible to talk about it. There was a class that had been disbanded, but it was treated as if nothing had happened in the first place."

There had to have been some form of external pressure.

"In any case, if the information is this limited, you not knowing that Kushida was the cause of the class's collapse can be excused. I doubt you were very interested in things like that at the time."

"Exactly. At the time I was focused on the entrance exam for this school. I was certain about the academic ability required for the examination, so I did not pay very much attention to what was happening."

To be expected. Even if her school's ratings dropped, she would have been confident enough in her ability to get in.

An event, thought to have been caused by Kushida, had caused a class to collapse. I'm certain that is a serious matter that would have an impact on further education or employment. I can't imagine the Kushida I know now doing anything like this. If the rumors are accurate, it would be understandable that she could not spare anyone who knew the truth. If this were to come to light, I have no doubt that Kushida's current position in the school will come to an end.

"If we put things in order, there was an incident caused by Kushida, and we don't know the specifics of what happened. But Kushida herself doesn't know that you don't know the specifics. She thinks that since you are from the same middle school, you should know the details to a certain extent. Is that everything?"

"Actually, she isn't exactly wrong because I do know that she was responsible for the incident."

She sighed. I began to see under what conditions Horikita had been placed.

In short, Kushida's one-sided misunderstanding and hostility is the cause for all of this. For Kushida, keeping her past hidden is important enough to her that she is willing to go to all of this effort to hide it completely.

Even if Horikita said she didn't know about the incident, Kushida wouldn't believe her. For Kushida, exactly how much Horikita knows may be trivial. The fact that we're speaking about this in the first place is evidence that Horikita knows about her past. It's very tricky.

"Then again, I don't understand."

"Are you referring to the content of the incident?"

"Well, it's all a mystery, and it's even unpleasant. Do you think it's simple for a class that doesn't have any problems to suddenly collapse?"

Horikita shook her head.

"Kushida was the trigger, which means that she may have caused the class to collapse on her own. How serious a thing does a student have to do to cause that?"

If it was simply a matter of bullying, it wouldn't be able to cause an event of that magnitude. If that were the case, I would only be able to remove one or two people from the class, at most.

"I think so too. To be honest, I can't imagine what would need to happen to cause something like that."

Even if I wanted the current Class D to disintegrate, it wouldn't be so easy to do.

"Powerful weapons would be required if the class is to disintegrate."

"Yeah..."

The weapons referred to here are not purely physical in meaning, but also include a variety of methods.

“If you were going to break up the class, which tactics would you use?”

"I'm sorry to answer your question with another question, but I feel like this one will get us to the point faster. Do you know what the strongest weapon in the world is? Let's limit the question to things that can be manipulated by Kushida. Think about it."

"I think I told you before. I think 'violence' is the most powerful weapon a person has. To be honest, 'violence' has a unique intensity. No matter how clever a scholar or exalted a politician, in the end, they will fall in the face of powerful violence. As long as the conditions are met, it's not impossible to disintegrate a class, because it's just a matter of sending everyone to the hospital."

Though dangerous, Horikita's example isn't incorrect. The class would ultimately be broken up.

“Yes, I do not dispute that violence is one of the strongest weapons. That said, it's impossible for Kushida to force everyone into desperation with violence. That would be an incredibly huge event.”

If Kushida came to school rushing around everywhere with a chainsaw, the school wouldn't have been able to keep quiet about it. It would have caused a lot of drama and controversy on TV.

“What if there's something else that doesn't lose out to the unique intensity

of violence and can instead compete with it?”

“Did you think of something? How she disintegrated the class?”

“If, as a premise, it was up to me to execute it. My answer would have to be...”

“Wait a minute.”

Horikita interrupted me, she thought once again and said:

“I would like to say ‘authority’, but that’s difficult to implement in campus life...”

Though she thought of the answer, she seemed to have no confidence in it.

“Authority is a very capable thing if it can be exercised, except in this case. Even the student president of this school can’t help it. There is no way to break up a class with authority.”

“Then what is it? The tool that anyone can manipulate and use as a weapon to disintegrate an entire class.”

“It’s not limited to Kushida, what kind of weapon can be manipulated by anyone? The answer would be a ‘lie’. Humans are inherently liars, so anyone can manipulate them. But depending on the time and place, a lie can even have the power to devour violence.”

Statistics clearly show that people lie two or three times a day. At first glance, it may seem impossible, but the definition of a lie is broad. “I’m just tired”, “I caught a cold”, “I didn’t notice the email” and “It’s fine”. All kinds of words contain lies.

“Lies... yes, maybe so.”

Lies are powerful. A lie can even kill someone.

“Well, then, I’ll speed this up. For example, assuming that you’re using your strongest weapons, ‘violence’ and ‘lies’, would you be able to break up Class D? Try to think about it.”

“I wouldn't say absolutely no way, but I can't say for sure. Try to imagine, even if you have to rely on violence to fight, there are several people I feel that it would be difficult to defeat. To tell you the truth, I can't imagine beating Sudō or Kōenji in an honest fight with my bare hands. On top of that, there are people like you whose strength is uncertain. Even if a weapon is prepared ahead of time, or I resort to attacking in the dark, if others adopt those strategies themselves it becomes a totally different story. This really is close to impossible to determine.”

Horikita seemed to take this more seriously than I thought, and she struggled to figure out the best way she could handle it.

“That conclusion is correct. Violence can be used by anyone, but the conditions get rather complicated.”

“Having said that, I also wouldn't be able to control it completely even if I had

to lie. Besides, there are many students in the class who are better at lying than they are at being violent, so there's no way around it. That fighting style isn't for me either.”

Horikita tried several simulations but seemed unable to give an answer.

“If we limited the situation to using one of the tactics, I don't think Kushida has the ability to be violent. In other words, it's a logical conclusion to think that she used a lie to break up the class.”

“Yeah...”

“But, can she do that?”

“I don't know. It might not be impossible, but it’s definitely impossible for me.”

It’s not that hard to force a single man into a corner. But if it’s the whole class, it’s a different story.

“Can Kushida manipulate violence or lies that we can’t even imagine? Or --”

Does Kushida possess a powerful weapon that doesn’t belong to either?

I don't know what weapon Kushida uses, but she does have a high chance of breaking up our class. If Kushida was also a victim of a class break-up, she wouldn't be so hostile towards Horikita.

“Kushida-san told me to my face that she would expel the people who knew about her past no matter what. If necessary, she will also go and make alliances with students like Katsuragi-kun, Sakayanagi-san, or Ichinose-san in order to force me into an adverse situation. As a matter of fact, she already joined hands with Ryūen-kun to try to frame me. As long as I stay in this school, even if Class D is in a bad situation, she won't ease up on her attacks on me.”

“It's really tricky. It means she has made the conscious decision to break up the class for the sake of hiding her past.”

“There's no doubt about that.”

Since she has already made such a declaration to Horikita, it would be for the best to take her threat seriously.

After making such a declaration of war to Horikita, Kushida requested to take part in the discussions with Horikita and Hirata. Publicly, it looked as if she was looking to help with the influence she had in the class, but in the background, she's been engaging in hostile acts... That is, the possibility of her being a spy is pretty high. However, even if there is the possibility of spying, we can not simply reject Kushida. Kushida has established a lot of trust in Class D, so if she was suddenly treated like an outsider, it may provoke a feeling of distrust from those around her.

"Let me confirm one thing, Horikita. What are you going to do about Kushida?"

“What am I going to do? I only have a few options to choose from in the first place. I can insist to Kushida and say ‘I don't know the details of your past,’ or I can say ‘I will never speak about your past to anyone,’ and hope that she

accepts it.”

“It’s not that easy. Kushida will continue to hold doubts no matter what, and there is a possibility that knowing that she caused a class back in middle school to collapse is enough to consider you as an enemy anyways.”

Horikita asked me for advice like this, and Kushida should be fully aware of it.

With that in mind, it's no wonder that I was included in the list of people she wanted to drop out of school...

Let’s leave this be for now.

“There is no other way than to simply talk to her, is there not?”

“I agree. This is a matter of discussion and asking for assistance. As you said, getting her to accept it from the bottom of her heart would be the only solution.”

Even if she is forced to accept it at first, Kushida will eventually vigorously resist it if she hasn’t truthfully accepted Horikita.

"Then don't think about it."

“I hear what you’re saying, and I think I’ve come to a conclusion on what to do here. In order to reach Class A, it might be necessary to make the tough decision to give up on attempting to persuade Kushida.”

After I say this, Horikita glares at me with an angry expression.

"Do you mean... Getting Kushida-san kicked out of school?"

I didn't deny it and nodded silently. It's tactical basics to strike before your enemy does.

Horikita didn't object to it, despite showing a look of disgust on her face.

"I didn't expect you to propose something on the level of getting her expelled ourselves. When I had resigned to let Sudō-kun fail the midterms and drop-out, weren't you the one who convinced me to do otherwise? But I understood. I understood that while it might be easier to let them fail, we would be sacrificing the strengths that they would bring to the class later on. In all honesty, if I had given up on Sudō-kun back then, the outcome of the sports festival would have been even grimmer than it ended up being. Plus, you could even see the improvement that Sudō-kun made during the midterm exams. Am I wrong?"

So Horikita, who finds friends unnecessary and thrives in loneliness has managed to change this much. Horikita had stopped living in her own world and the sudden change had left me surprised. Even though the change is good, her response was unrealistic. Horikita hasn't always been the best at friendly dialogue, so I have doubts at how realistic it would be to try and convince Kushida. Although I would like to praise her for her results with Sudō, the situation at hand is very different.

"This situation is not comparable to teaching people how to study to avoid dropping out of school. To be honest, I didn't think that the reason behind Kushida's actions would be such a one-sided hatred. I agree with your point that it would be better if we didn't have to resort to measures like this, and I'm glad

to see that your way of thinking has changed, but this situation is different. As long as you're at this school, Kushida will keep getting in your way. In this way, the unity of Class D and the institution of the school system itself will collapse. If you don't do something about it now, are you sure you won't regret it later?"

In response to my opinion, Horikita did not appear swayed at all.

On the contrary, it seemed as though her own stance on the matter solidified even further. Her eyebrows rose quickly.

"She is very skilled. It's needless to say that she has the ability to get others to work together, but she's also quite adept at observing the abilities of others. If she were willing to work together with us, she would be a really strong addition to Class D."

I'm not going to deny that. If Kushida honestly worked to better Class D, she would indeed be quite reliable.

Having said that, is that really possible?

"The matter with her is my responsibility to face. I can't just abandon her. I'll keep talking with her and I'll make sure she understands."

Did she choose the path of misery herself? Horikita seriously seems to intend to face Kushida for the sake of the class. It's clear that no matter what I say, nothing will change her mind on this.

"I understand. If you say as much, I'll stand by and watch."

If you show me such a firm will with your eyes, I'll also want to believe in the possibility of getting along together.

I wonder if she'll be able to turn Kushida into a partner, just as she did with Sudō.

"I wasn't asking for your help on the matter. This isn't a problem for you to solve."

"Yeah, it's entirely not a problem I should interfere in."

We had talked for a long time and almost made a full lap around campus. We should be arriving in the area Pallet is at soon.

"I told you about Kushida-san because I know you won't say anything about it to anyone, and because I thought you would understand and agree with me."

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet your expectations."

Although she merely stated her straightforward opinion, we ended up disagreeing in the end.

"Now that I have provided you with valuable information, would you please answer a question of my own?"

"What kind of question?"

Horikita stopped and looked at me with the same firmness as before. It seems that apart from the matter of Kushida, she has another thing she wants to discuss.

“After the sports festival... What did you do to Ryūen?”

“What did I do?”

To be asked this question... Horikita was the one who dealt with most of Ryūen’s schemes. I don’t know exactly what Ryūen did during the sports festival.

If the situation played out as I had theorized it would, then there’s only one response I can give her.

“I only influenced what happened at the end. I stopped Ryūen’s plan from succeeding.

“You mean you recorded the conversation Ryūen had with the others from Class C?”

I affirmed her by nodding lightly.

“A recording of another class's strategy meeting isn’t something that’s easy to get your hands on. How did you get that kind of thing? Ryūen-kun had said there was a spy, but you don’t have a deep enough connection with someone who would expose Class C, do you?”

Of course, Horikita wouldn't know about the incident on the cruise ship between Karuizawa and Class C's Manabe.

"I used every means at my disposal. Getting that audio file was just exercising one of them."

"There's another thing. I'm angry that you backed me up on your own, it means that you're acting on the premise that I will fail. But, I guess it actually turned out how you expected, so I can't really argue with it. Moreover, I was forbidden from looking into your affairs, so I can't ask for the answer. It was a tricky situation... If you hadn't done something, I would... Thank you."

"That's a very roundabout thank you."

I thought I was going to be severely criticized and wasn't expecting her to finally give her thanks.

"I had promised to cooperate to a certain extent, so I will at least do that much."

"Although I think this may be an unnecessary intercession, is it okay to make such conspicuous movements? Because of this incident, Ryūen-kun should now be entirely convinced that there is someone in Class D working behind the scenes. Logically, you're still a candidate on his list. I think the peaceful days that you like so much are going to be in jeopardy."

Horikita is right. The situation is not what I was expecting.

But that wish is hard to imagine now anyways. Chabashira-sensei had vaguely brought up that man, plus there's Sakayanagi who knows my past. Ultimately, no one knows what will happen in the end. In the future, the existence of Horikita may become a trump card.

In short, I'm desperately looking for what to do to stabilize my life moving forward.

Horikita waited for my answer with a look saying 'What do you think?'

"Oh yeah... Hold on."

"You think for so long and can't even answer. I'm beginning to lose my understanding of you as a person."

"You didn't know me from the beginning."

"That's true."

In any case, Horikita doesn't have the leisure time to concentrate on Ryūen or me.

If she doesn't deal with the poison that Kushida has hidden inside Class D, there wouldn't be any point in thinking of other things.

(Part 1 End)

(Part 2)

“Ah, mou- What did you do? You are too late already so how about an apology?”

As soon as we arrived at Pallet, Karuizawa glared at Horikita and immediately started complaining.

“We’ll start right away. After all, Hirata-kun has club activities to get to.”

“Wow, ignore me. As expected of Horikita-san.”

Horikita disregarded Karuizawa’s request for an apology and sat down at her seat.

“And you still didn't apologize at all.”

With the two of us now present, the group at the table consisted of Hirata, Karuizawa, Kushida, as well as Sudō.

It's true that there's not much time left until club activities begin.

It's already about 3:50 in the afternoon. Club activities start at around 4:30.

The most anxious one of us should be Hirata as a member of the soccer club, but he was very calm and maintained his smile. He seemed to be looking forward to this meeting, his youthful eyes shining brightly.

After Horikita took her seat, without even ordering a beverage, she spoke to the group:

“Well, let’s start with these upcoming quizzes.”

“Should we be concerned about those? All of these tests are being held one after the other. It’s a burden to have to study for all of them. Plus, thankfully the school said that the results of those quizzes won’t be reflected in our grades at all.”

Midterms, quizzes, and then finals. This storm of constant studying would undoubtedly become an unbearable pressure on students who lack the proper study skills.

“Well, I don’t intend to force people to study for these quizzes. But I don’t think the school is having us do these quizzes purely for the purpose of seeing the students’ academic strength. We just finished, and passed, the midterm exams after all.”

“Isn’t it because the midterms this semester had really simple questions?”

“So you’re saying that the quizzes will then be really difficult? That would only be inefficient for the school.”

If they made these upcoming quizzes really difficult, it would defeat the

purpose of a midterm exam in the first place. It would be like putting the cart before the horse.

“In other words, the quiz itself is meaningful, right? Does the school have a goal in mind outside of seeing our academic ability?”

“Wait what? What do you mean, Yōsuke-kun?”

Although she didn’t show much interest in Horikita’s remarks, Karuizawa became invested after Hirata started showing concern.

“If the purpose for the quizzes is not to confirm our scholastic ability, then there can only be one other reason for them. The results of the quizzes will decide the partner selection for the final exams. That’s the only thing it could be.”

Sudō had a serious expression as he listened to Hirata and Horikita’s discussion.

“Do you understand, Sudō?”

“...Barely.”

It appears that his understanding of the situation seemed to be rather dubious. They continued on with the discussion despite this.

“There must be a process for determining your partner for the finals hidden in these quizzes. In other words, as long as we figure out this process, we can gain

an advantage in the final exam.”

“What does that mean, Ayanokōji?”

Sudō whispers to me quietly. He didn’t ask Horikita directly to make sure that he didn’t interrupt their ongoing dialogue.

“It means that controlling the outcome of the quiz is the first condition for passing the final exam.”

“Ah! That’s what I thought too.”

Sudō’s eyes lit up brilliantly. He was spreading a lie he couldn’t possibly keep up with.

Horikita’s interpretation was undoubtedly correct. The quizzes certainly determine who you ultimately get matched up with. This means there must be a sorting system that we can learn about ahead of time.

The school promised to eventually explain it to the students so they don’t end up making complex, strange decisions.

As to how thoroughly Horikita understands the situation, I can do nothing but watch.

“Like matching up people with similar scores, something like that?”

Karuizawa properly understood the situation and casually proposed an idea.

“Or matching people who answered the same for each question?”

Sudō heard this and desperately worked his head to give input of his own.

“Neither possibility can be denied as there is no way we can know for sure.”

Hirata seemed to have some doubts about Horikita’s response. The smile on his face vanished and turned into a serious expression.

“I understand the general outline of the situation, but I have some doubts about the sorting process.”

“What would those be? No matter what you have to say, I’d be glad to hear your opinion.”

Horikita prompted for Hirata to share his thoughts on the matter with a welcoming gaze.

“To find out the truth behind something like the sorting mechanism, I feel like if we were to consult senior students we could get an answer pretty quickly. If this test was conducted in the previous years, the likelihood that the rules are the same would be pretty high. Isn’t that what the teachers have been trying to hide?”

Kushida had been listening in silence all this time, but after hearing this, she chimed in with some words of agreement.

“I’m a bit curious about that as well. I think that they would be willing to tell me if they were a good friend of mine.”

If it’s a simple rule, it would be safe to tell us from the start. Since we didn’t get any explanation, it’s more likely that there are no rules against doing this, or that the rules are complex. This is what they seemed to be trying to say.

“As expected of Yōsuke-kun! That’s right!”

Horikita glared at Karuizawa as she showered Hirata with praise before folding her arms in contemplation.

“I don’t know for sure if Hirata’s idea is correct, but the school probably won’t be hostile to attempting to learn more about the rules. In fact, I think they consider it a prerequisite for the students to find out about them.”

“What are you saying Suzune? Please explain it clearly.”

Sudō was thinking so much that his head was smoking, and he couldn’t help but ask.

“In other words, are you saying that finding the rules is not all there is to it, and the real exam begins after we determine them? If that was the case, it could lead to devastating results if we don't learn the rules.”

Hirata imagined the worst outcome of half of the class dropping out at once.

“I think that’s the core of this exam. It’s hypothetical, but as Hirata-kun just said, if we do not see through the partner sorting process for the final exams, it could lead to devastating results. But, regardless of whether or not she did it as a courtesy, Chabashira-sensei told us that this was the first time that Class D has not had a drop-out by this time in the year. In previous years, only one or two groups of partners dropped out due to this test. Don’t you think there’s something fishy about that?”

“No, I don’t understand at all.”

Sudō finally gave up and bumped his forehead into the table.

“I’ve come to understand the situation. Horikita-san, what you’re trying to say is: ‘There is no serious threat with the final exams even if we don’t determine the rules for the partner selection.’, right?”

“Correct.”

“Can I ask about your basis for that?”

Karuizawa asked Horikita with a confident attitude.

“These final exams are going to be challenged in pairs, and the average score for the class will be the same regardless of what pairs were placed in. Considering that the finals made by other students will be very difficult, if we don’t figure out the rules our only option is to take the exam. If that happened, the result would be a negative one, right?”

“Yeah. I think it would be pretty bad if two students who were close to the

red line were paired up with each other.”

“Since we’re afraid of that outcome, we just need to figure out how the partners are decided, right?”

“Yes. We absolutely must know the rules first. Then, as Hirata-kun said, we need to take the quizzes with the goal of avoiding the worst case scenario of failing students getting paired up together. However, Chabashira-sensei said that in previous years only one or two groups of students have dropped out due to this exam. Only one or two, is this not too little? Suppose that the students in our class are grouped in the worst way possible. Nearly 10 students would likely be forced to drop out.”

“...I see. That is what she said.”

“Hey Yōsuke-kun. What does this all mean? I’m getting a little confused.”

“Well, let me see... How do I explain it? So, in order to explain this correctly, let's forget about trying to understand the sorting methods of the quizzes. Suppose we went and simply took these quizzes right now, what do you think will happen?”

“Ah, wouldn’t that be bad? If the students with bad brains were concentrated in their own pairs, the number of dropouts would be alarmingly high.”

“I think so too. However, in previous years, only one or two groups of students dropped out of Class D due to this exam.”

“Isn’t that weird?”

Sudō seems to have caught on to this.

“This pretty clearly proves that the rule is something like: ‘partners should be set to a balanced combination’. In other words, that is the ‘proof’ of the existence of the rule.”

Through a gradual in-depth conversation on the matter, we had finally come to the ‘proof’ of the rule of the quiz.

“The answer that we’ve obtained from all of this considering is the ‘high scores will be paired with low scores’ rule. I can’t imagine it to be something other than that. Suppose that I score the highest on the quizzes with a score of 100, and Sudō scores the lowest with a zero. In that case, we would be paired together as our scores are the farthest apart. By doing so, we will be able to calculate the most balanced test results compared to the rest of the class.”

Karuizawa understood, but new problems emerged.

“So that’s how it is... But, doesn’t that mean that students who are near the average score are at higher risk?”

“Yes, the closer a score is to the class average, the more dangerous this test will end up being for them.”

Students with low scores and high scores will be grouped together, but the people in the middle will end up with someone at their same skill level.

At the same time, the difficulty level of the final exams is expected to be high.

The problem may end up as trying to figuring out how to accurately measure the scholastic ability of the class.

Consulting students and preparing countermeasures ahead of time can also probably help solve this issue.

“If we confirm the rules with a few senior students, and we get the same answer from all of them, then this first issue with the partnering system will be resolved. This also means that we can begin thinking about the next stage. Hirata-kun, Kushida-san, can I trouble you to confirm this with an upperclassman?”

“Of course I can.”

“I’ll ask the seniors at the soccer club.”

The two of the readily agreed. We could see a strategy start to form for dealing with the exam.

“I also want to ask a question here.”

“Go ahead.”

Even in the face of Karuizawa’s doubt, Horikita did not show a disagreeable expression.

“Because the students of the class get split up into pairings, what happens if the size of the class is odd?”

“Although that is an interesting question, worrying about it right now is unnecessary. At the time of enrollment, the number of students in all classes from A to D was even. Because there haven't been any student withdrawals so far, there shouldn't be any impact. However, even though this is only speculation, if there was a prior withdrawal, the odd one out would probably be put into a tough situation.”

“I wonder if that's so. It would be a pity to suffer a loss for a reason like that.”

It appears that Kushida is thinking that the school would have a gentler alternative.

“The number of people enrolled in each class at the start of the year is absolutely an even one. I believe even if someone's withdrawal was due to unforeseen circumstances, the class would have to bear the responsibility for it.”

When it came to the uninhabited island exam and the sports festival, the school imposed harsh punishments on those who didn't participate. This does give the impression that there's a high probability that what she says is true. If there was even a single dropout, there is the potential for us to have a huge disadvantage in future exams. Horikita is probably already aware of the importance of saving Sudō.

“Did this answer your question?”

“Well, sorta. It was a waste of effort to try to understand in the first place.”

Karuizawa’s little questions were answered and everyone moved on to the next issue.

“As long as we confirm the purpose of the quizzes, we can move on to the next issue. However, this is a question that bothers me... Which class do we nominate to attack? My answer would be simple. There is no option other than Class C.”

Before listening to anyone else’s opinion, Horikita first gave her own and began to elaborate on her decision.

“Needless to say, the reason is due to their collective academic ability. The only aspect of Class C that is inferior to Class A and Class B is in academic ability. If we look at how the class points have changed so far, it should be obvious, isn’t it?

It was correct as a basic idea. It would be negative to challenge a class with a high academic aptitude. However, despite knowing that, Hirata gives his input:

“I agree with you, Horikita-san. However, Class A and Class B will definitely see this as well. If multiple classes decide that Class C is the easiest target, we might end up suffering in a bad situation. Something like this is one outcome that comes to mind---”

Hirata wrote out the imaginary situation in his notebook.

Class A nominates Class D → No conflicts with other classes → Target is Class

D.

Class B nominates Class C → Wins lottery → Target is Class C.

Class C nominates Class B → No conflicts with other classes → Target is Class B

Class D nominates Class C → Loses lottery → Target defaults to Class A.

“Although this is just the worst outcome, it an entirely feasible one.”

“Wow, an outcome like this would be awful. Being targeted by Class A and then losing the lottery for attacking Class C. I feel like there’s no way we can win.”

“Yeah, there’s no reason for any class to not target Class C. But we have no reason to be afraid of picking them. Shouldn’t we take every step possible to reduce the likelihood of losing?”

Horikita advocated to nominate Class C despite the risk of losing the lottery.

“Is there a noticeable gap in academic ability between Class A and Class B? I’m also curious about how different we are compared to Class C.”

I try to throw out very simple questions.

“There is no doubt that Class A is the best, but I don’t think that they are on a

level of their own. There is a considerable gap between Class B and Class C... I'll solidly investigate this."

We understand the academic ability of Class D, but we don't know the specifics about other classes.

In retrospect, the school has not informed us of this. The only thing we know at most is the increases in class points. But we can't make clear decisions about their academic abilities with that alone. From that point of view, maybe it's because the school planned on holding tests like this. The number of class points is not an entirely academic gap. If it turns out that Class B is better than Class A, we may end up seeing a painful result.

Having said that, I quietly looked to the man sitting next to Horikita.

Almost at the same time, Horikita began to speak to the man.

"You are very quiet, Sudō-kun. Normally you'd be complaining."

"This topic is not at a level that I can understand. If I complained, wouldn't I be disturbing you guys?"

After Sudō said this, we all held our breaths and fell silent.

"What? Did I say something weird?"

"I just took what you had said for granted, so I was surprised... What are your thoughts on the situation?"

She was probably expecting Sudō to interject in the middle and disrupt the conversation out of confusion.

In the face of Sudo's maturity, Horikita expression went from shock to gentleness.

"Well, one thing I can say is that we have to defeat our opponents one by one, right? We can't just immediately become Class A in one go, so attacking the class that we're closest to, Class C, is the obvious and understandable choice."

"True. Aiming at Class C would indeed help us get results the fastest. If we win in the total score against them, the gap between Class C and our own will shrink dramatically."

"I can understand that, but it would be nice if Class A attacked Class C, right? After all, Class A will definitely get a higher total score than they will, so Class C would be guaranteed to lose points. Wouldn't that be really good?"

"It depends on what our goal with this exam is. But in general, the fact that Class C is the target is still the same. Let's assume that, either us or one of the other classes will beat Class C."

If the end goal is to reduce the total points of Class C, it may be better to have Class A or Class B attack them and have a better chance of success. However, Class D also wants to win and increase their points. For that to happen, it would be better to have a weaker opponent. If we avoid Class C, it just means that we will have to defeat a stronger enemy. The reason that Horikita's plan to attack Class C is so reliable is because it's the easiest to defeat the weakest enemy.

“After all this consideration, everyone seems to agree with Horikita-san’s proposal. I will follow this proposal as well.”

Since my goal was to avoid making things complicated, I only suggested various possibilities for the discussion.

“Thank you. It feels like we can move on to the next steps.”

Despite one or two hiccups, everyone came to the same conclusion.

We disbanded after 4 P.M. Hirata and Sudō both left to participate in their club activities. Karuizawa followed Hirata to the field. The only ones left behind were Horikita and myself, as well as Kushida.

“Then, I will go and ask our seniors about the rules of the upcoming quizzes and report to you my findings.”

“Thank you.”

Kushida did not say anything further and left as expected.

“What are you going to do, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“There should be no problems if I leave it all to you and Hirata. To be honest, this development is almost perfect and was handled impeccably. You have confidence in your plan, right?”

“So far. But to take this final exam, we need to be able to take it head-on.”

“Oh, yes. In short, if the entire class doesn’t put in the effort to improve their academic ability moving forward, there will be nothing left to say. However, put another way, the exams will be easy to pass if everyone improves their academic ability to some extent. If necessary, I can adjust my score and team up with anyone according to your wishes.”

“Can I count on you to put your mind to it?”

“If that’s all it takes. If necessary, I can also attend the study sessions, but I will not be responsible for any guidance.”

“Because you intend to act as the completely useless student.”

“I just leave the facts as they are.”


This is an appropriate place for a compromise between the two of us. At least I think it is, but Horikita has proven herself to not work by ordinary means.

“Let me think about it. After all, you are also a member of Class D, I would like to give you a suitable role. For the sake of everyone.”

“.....I'll consider it.”

I did my best to avoid the topic.

Name	Hideo Sotomura (外村 秀雄, <i>Sotomura Hideo</i>)	
Class	1st Year, Class D	
ID #	01T004686	
Club	None	
Birthday	January 1st	
Academic Ability	D	
Intellect	C+	
Judgement	D	
Physical Ability	E	
Teamwork	C	

A black and white anime-style portrait of a young man with short, dark, wavy hair and round glasses. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white collared shirt and a dark tie. He has a neutral expression and is looking directly forward.**Interviewer's Evaluation**

There is nothing particularly outstanding about this student. All of his abilities are relatively average. He does not like sports and he is not good at them. Since middle school he began to show excellent skill in computers and other technology, repeatedly getting good grades. We hope he can develop his own skill while improving his attitude towards sports and be invested in both at the same time.

Homeroom Teacher Records

Since his body weight is obviously increasing, from now on I will guide this student to engage in suitable sports as expected of a normal student.

Chapter 3: C-Class on the Move

(Introduction)

On the same day after school, the atmosphere in one of the classrooms was abnormally frozen.

The reason was clear. It was the feeling of intimidation that came from the man sitting at the podium, overlooking Class C.

“Looking back on the exams so far, there are several unnatural things.”

The name of the man who spoke to the class was Ryūen Kakeru. He's the leader of Class C and a dictator. Standing beside him was Albert Yamada, Ishizaki, as well as other students proficient in martial arts. One could feel the silent threat being made... in the event that there was a student who wanted to rebel against Ryūen, they would not hesitate to resort to violence.

“For it to come to this, it couldn't have been by chance.”

It was like he was talking to himself, but there was a vague feeling as though it was being spoken to someone.

“Based on what happened on the uninhabited island, and at the sports festival, there appears to be a person in Class D who thinks like me.”

“Someone like Ryūen-kun? I don’t think Class D has someone like that...”

Ishizaki couldn’t help but speak, doubting that there could be someone else out there like Ryūen. This is because Ryūen is both respectable and detestable, an amazing and incomprehensible existence. Ryūen smiles and looks at Ishizaki.

“I used to think that too, but I feel like I need to face reality.”



“Is this also related to the results of the uninhabited island exam and the sports festival?”

“That’s it. But rest assured, I have a general idea of how the other side is doing things. Listen you. Moving forward, we'll be looking to launch an all-out attack on Class D. I must take out the person running Class D from the shadows. Class A and Class B will have to be put aside for now.”

Few students had objections to Ryūen’s plans. Even if someone was against it, it would be impossible to speak up because the class has signed a contract with the devil himself.

“Ryūen-san..... Does Class D really have someone working in the background? Someone other than Horikita or Hirata?”

“Yes. And, the people in this class have the key to exposing their identity.”

His eyes moved away from Ishizaki and once again went to Class C.

“What are you trying to say, Ryūen?”

In this heavy atmosphere, Ibuki stood in the classroom with her arms crossed at her chest and threw these words at Ryūen.

“Kuku. Ibuki, can you not even listen quietly?”

“I don’t have that much free time, and you don’t get to keep intimidating your classmates.”

“You’re a big talker for someone who hasn’t asked for permission. Haven’t you already made a fool of yourself?”

“That’s...”

In the face of his remark, Ibuki had no choice but to eat her words. In particular, her failure at the sports festival was embarrassing. Ryūen had changed the students lined up to race against Horikita after Ibuki had requested to compete with her directly. The result was a very narrow defeat. It was a pity, she had almost caught up with Horikita.

However, Ibuki also had the option of rebuttal. She lowered her arms and glared at Ryūen.

“Are you one to talk? At the end of the day, you failed to defeat Horikita at the sports festival. Did you manage to get the private points for the collection? Aren’t you the same as me?”

“The same as you? Don’t make jokes like that. The strategy I set up at the sports festival was perfect.”

“What’s up with that outcome? You don’t even explain anything to us and now you say there’s another guy that thinks like you in that class? You want us to just accept that?”

All of the students in the class were trembling due to the rebuttals being made by Ibuki. They all wanted to avoid offending Ryūen. But Ryūen paid them no mind, and showed a constantly slight smile.

“Don’t you think that no matter how perfect a strategy, it will fail if somebody leaks it?”

“.....Leak?”

“The mysterious success of Class D is due to the mysterious existence of ‘X’, who dares to draw and manipulate the Class C students at my command. In short, we have spies among us.”

There was a little confusion in the classroom because of his remark. Ibuki’s eyes blew open in surprise.

“Are you serious...?”

“This is a fact. My cohesiveness... no, it seems that authority was not enough. It truly is a pity.”

Ryūen smiled happily at the fact that he will become intertwined with the spy.

A disaster had sprung for everyone in the class, not just those looking to get out of the room and attend club activities.

Everyone present began praying that this would be over soon.

“However, this noisy espionage will end here.”

Ryūen slammed the podium with his palm and silenced the chaos of the room. The scene sank into silence.

“First of all, I will try to asking honestly. The student who betrayed me, raise your hand.”

He did not hesitate to issue a direct declaration. Of course, none of the students raised their hands. Some of the students glanced around at each other, which was responded to with feigned ignorance. There are also those who stayed still and held their breath to avoid attracting attention.

“Oh yeah... if you come forward easily, you won't have betrayed me at all.”

The presence of a spy may shake Class C, but there was nothing but joy in Ryūen's heart.

“I knew that the spy would choose to hide. Then, you don't have to raise your hand. No, rather, don't raise your hand. Even if you're now considering it, stay completely hidden.”

Ryūen made an unexpected statement to the spy who would have been found sooner or later.

“What are you saying? Are you really tolerating traitors?”

“You're annoying, Ibuki. Don't disturb my pleasure. I'll kill you if you do that again.”

Ryūen's smiling face tightened into an expression of anger for a moment and he glared at Ibuki.

His sentence seemed to be a joke, but his message was serious. Ryūen wouldn't treat anyone differently due to their gender. As long as he judges them to be the enemy and in the way of his plans, then no matter what, he would settle the matter with his fist.

"I've been trying not to make a big deal out of it. Others may think I'm lying, but it's true. To put it simply, I've been slacking off."

'Bam!' 'Bam!' He struck the podium twice. It was the sound of the upcoming purge.

"However... Maybe that's a bad thing. After all, there is a traitor."

'Bam!' The classroom further resounded with the sound. Every time this happened, timid students began to shake.

"All this means is that I'll have to play some games. It's nothing. Not a big deal. It's just a silly game where we find a spy who's trying to remain hidden. For most of the students present, this should be meaningless, so there's nothing to be afraid of. It shouldn't take long, it'll take less than 30 minutes."

Ryūen said this since, other than for the spy, this situation was not relevant to everyone, so there's no reason for them be afraid.

The room was full of an atmosphere of fear, so it wasn't so simple. The only one who had remained calm in the face of Ryūen was Ibuki, but even she was

beginning to be swallowed by the authority of Ryūen.

“First things first, everyone unlock your phone and place it on your desk. I’ll check it myself. Are there any idiots who don’t have their phone with them? If you don’t, speak up immediately. That person is the culprit.”

Complying with Ryūen’s instructions, the students placed their phones on their desks immediately to avoid suspicion.

“A very sensible decision, it’s very helpful.”

Ishizaki went around the classroom and gathered the phones one by one. As he didn’t know whose phone was whose, he attached a note paper with their name written on it ahead of time.

Ibuki also took out her mobile phone from her pocket. Although she wasn’t convinced, she handed it over to Ishizaki.

“Ryūen-san, everyone’s phone has been collected. Our phones have also been included.”

“Thank you for your hard work. Then, it’s time we conduct a thorough investigation.”

“But where should we look... Call history?”

“As if someone who is trying to stay hidden is going to use the call function! Look at the email history, and of course look at the text messages. Even if it’s a

conversation with someone, look at all of it. We can't rule out the possibility they're interacting with each other under an alternative name."

"Wait, wait a minute, there are a lot of very personal messages on my phone!"

A girl shouted. She couldn't help but scream.

The fear of her personal information being seen had surpassed her fear of being suspected.

"Nishino. You don't want me to look at your phone?"

"Of course! Even if it's you Ryūen-kun, It's unacceptable!"

"Are you joking, Nishino? You gave your phone to Ryūen-kun on the cruise ship, didn't you? Why are you so concerned now?"

"This, this is different from that time! All he did then was do a confirmation check of my email from the school!"

Ryūen was not surprised at all, and listened to Nishino's appeal indifferently. During the special exam on the cruise ship, Ryūen collected all of the phones in Class C and confirmed their contents. However, as she had complained, nothing personal was inspected at that time. It was simply a confirmation of the messages received from the school. This was the same type of event, but altogether the situations are different. If it's private messages, information such as who someone liked or disliked would inevitably be read. Those type of things people would absolutely prefer to remain hidden from others.

“Of course you know that you will be suspected, Nishino.”

“I, I will obey you, Ryūen-kun, but there are some things that cannot be accepted!”

Nishino wasn't the type who would usually take a strong stance, but she didn't seem to be willing to back down.

It was as she if was broadcasting that she had something hidden that she didn't want to be seen.

“Nishino, was it you?”

Students in the class had begun to suspect Nishino.

One of them, Takumi Oda, had voiced their doubt.

“No! I am not the spy!”

“But you're hiding something and acting so suspicious...”

“I just want to protect my privacy!”

Ryūen didn't show any interest in the conversation happening in the classroom. He reaches out and grabs one of the phones on the table.

“Your cell phone is this one, isn’t it, Nishino?”

“Hey!”

Nishino expects for him to start to look over the contents and begins to panic. However...

Ryūen hands Nishino’s phone over to Ishizaki and says:

“Give this back to Nishino.”

“Sh-should I? You didn’t confirm the content.”

“I told you to return it to her.”

Ishizaki promptly apologized to Ryūen and returned the phone to Nishino.

In the face of this series of events, Nishino, as well as the other students are shaken.

“It’s not such an incredible thing. I judged you to be innocent, that’s why I returned it to you. That’s it. It’s to be expected right? It wasn’t the traitor’s cell phone. It would be a waste of time and energy to look at it.”

Ryūen disregarded the dumbfounded Nishino and other students, and without any change to his attitude he continued:

“If you find this unacceptable like Nishino has, feel free to raise your hand. However, be prepared to be suspected much more than she was.”

Nishino didn't have her phone inspected, and was considered 'innocent', the second and third people wouldn't be so lucky. His statement conveys this message: choose between raising Ryūen's suspicions, or privacy.

In the face of these two options, four girls and two boys raised their hands despite their fears.

“There are actually six people who are defying Ryūen-san... The spy is definitely one of them! And the last one to raise his hand, Nomura, you aren't thinking of saving yourself by jumping on the bandwagon, are you?”

Ryūen showed a gloomy smile in response to Ishizaki's words.

“No, no! I wasn't going to do that!”

Nomura denies out of fear of being suspected.

“Gather their phones.”

“Yes.”

Ishizaki collected their six phone and handed them over to Ryūen.

“So, even if you all are suspected, you don't want us to take a look at

anything?”

They all gave different responses, but they all agreed to this statement.

“Nomura, you took quite some time before raising your hand, don't tell me you were waiting for the right opportunity?”

“Eh! No, that...”

“Your eyes are darting around the room in an exaggerated way, and you’re sweating.”

“What!?”

Nomura’s personality was originally weak, and it seemed that he was so distressed that he was on the verge of fainting.

Looking at him in such a state, Ryūen gave out a happy laugh before turning to Ishizaki to give out instructions.

“Ishizaki, these people are all ‘innocent’, give them their phones back.”

He was ordered. This was another shock. Ryūen did not look at the contents and had Ishizaki return all of the phones. None of the students outside of Ryūen could understand the reason behind these actions.

“Will you explain what’s going on?”

“I’ll explain it later.”

Ryūen did not give Ibuki the answer she was hoping for. He ran his hand through his hair and picked up her cell phone.

“As for the rest of the cell phones let’s thoroughly investigate. We’ll start with Ibuki.”

“.....Whatever you say.”

(Intro End)

(Part 1)

Ryūen finished going through the final phone, having confirmed the content of them all on his own.

The whole situation took about 20 minutes, and he spent less than a minute on each phone. It was impossible to feel as though he had thoroughly gone through all of them. Most of the students had their doubts, but none of them would dare speak up about it.

But for the spy, the tens of seconds that their mobile phone was being examined should have been very long and stressful.

“I see. It turns out that there is no information contained within these phones.”

“Then Nishino or one of the others who were 'innocent' turned out to be the traitor after all...”

“That’s not it.”

Ibuki’s irritation and doubt did not disappear even with Ryūen’s assertion.

“But, in fact, you didn’t find any spies, did you? Explain to me exactly what’s going on here. Is there really a spy here in the first place?”

Ibuki’s heart was in doubt. Ryūen said there was a spy, but was it just a lie created in order to hide his failure?

Ryūen had believed in an invisible presence working behind Horikita ever since he had received the results of the uninhabited island test, but there had been no conclusive evidence since then that such a puppet master ‘X’ actually exists.

In fact, other classes had started to pay attention to the girl named Suzune Horikita.

“Proof is stronger than theory. In that case, let me personally tell you

something. I assume this is something everyone here already knows very well.”

Ryūen played the audio file sent to him by ‘X’. The voice on the recording was one that every student in Class C had heard before. The voice of Kakeru Ryūen explaining his strategy for the sports festival to his classmates.

“This was sent to me when I was one step away from victory over a desperate Suzune. Thanks to this, I wasn’t even able to see her kowtow to me, much less see any points. Do you understand now?”

“Wait a minute. Even if we assume that you didn’t record that yourself, but instead it was recorded by a spy, there are still strange questions left unanswered. We didn’t discuss a detailed time for having Horikita kowtow to you. They managed to know the whole plan as well as the details we didn’t speak of? There’s no way.”

Such a conclusion made sense when considering the details Ryūen gave. Not only was their strategy leaked, but the timing for his discussion with Horikita after the sports festival was as well.

“It was a coincidence, purely a matter of probability. The best time for him to make a move was after school after the sports festival was over. Besides, I don’t believe the other party was interested in stopping Horikita’s apology. There is nothing written in the message that came with the audio file.”

“What’s going on...?”

Ryūen analyzed the blank message he received that contained the audio file.

“X, the master of Class D, is very clearly telling me that he’s aware of the strategy I came up with by sending me this audio file. Since he knew about my plans, he could have avoided the attacks I had targeted against Suzune at the sports festival. He should have been able to prevent Suzune from being defeated and being forced to apologize altogether. However, this X deliberately ignored these openings. Despite knowing my strategy, I was allowed to rout Suzune, and of course, she suffered due to this. She didn’t expect that she would be hurt, and the results of the competition for Class D weren’t going to improve. On top of all this, there’s the guilt of having hurt someone else. Her mental state should be in a pretty bad place.”

“By letting Ryūen-shi carry out his strategy, did he not make the audio file into credible evidence?”

It’s understandable why the mushroom-headed student with glasses, Kaneda, would think this. Although the plan carried risk, if the plan failed entirely and didn’t bring any results, the sound file would not be considered valid evidence. It would just be considered as ‘a failed plan to defeat Horikita’.

“How very smart of you, Kaneda. As long as we execute the strategy, the audio file has meaning. Then it could make sense as evidence.”

“The plans made by this ‘X’ are truly brutal. He knows harm will come to his partner, but he takes no steps to avoid it.”

“Yes. This type of guy isn’t interested in Suzune’s apology. That’s the reason why nothing was written in the message. This is to say, from his perspective, he doesn’t hold any regard for Suzune’s pride or the loss of pride that she will go through.”

“I can’t understand. Wouldn’t it be better to prevent Horikita from getting hurt.....?”

Other students were probably agreeing with Ibuki’s feelings on the topic. It was clear that Ryūen had intended to target Horikita, so X should have been able to resolve the situation before the sports festival even began. There were options available such as changing the participation table according to Class C’s strategy, or sending the audio file to Ryūen to stop him in advance. If he had done that, Horikita wouldn’t have been hurt.

“What if X intended to submit the audio file to the school?”

If you know the plans of the enemy beforehand, the typical strategy would be to use this knowledge to save your classmates. But if there were any merits to not doing anything and deliberately ignoring the plans, it would be that you could strike a major blow at Class C. If the audio file was given to the school after the operation had already played out, Class C would undoubtedly take the most damage. If it was revealed that he had deliberately used foul play against Horikita, and then tried to squeeze points out of her as compensation, the worst outcome would be Ryūen being forced to drop out.

But now that it’s already halfway through October, the possibility of this happening has almost vanished entirely. If they were to bring up such an old topic now, the investigation itself would not only be very troublesome, but Class C would be able to destroy all their evidence and plan their retreat. So why would X do such a thing?

“This naive way of fighting has saved us entirely by chance. Could it be said that he has not fully utilized his assets? He went out of his way to obtain this information, but then proceeded to act passively. If Horikita-shi had paid the private points to Ryūen-shi, we would have won, and it would have been X’s

defeat.”

Kaneda analyzed the situation and came to this conclusion.

Since X had learned of their strategy before the sports festival, it follows that he should have had a complete victory during the festival.

“That’s not right. X had found a useful way to use the information by deliberately not using it. Even if Suzune had paid out the private points earlier to make amends, he could have easily used the sound file as evidence in order to retrieve them. He could have included a message such as ‘If you do not return the private points, this matter will be made public.’”

“You mean he knows how to use threats, but he deliberately doesn’t use them?”

“Yeah, and he even allowed me to force Suzune to kowtow. Kowtowing, unlike the private points, is not something that has a numeric value. It’s only there in the physical form. You can’t undo or reverse it later, right?”

In other words, this is what it all boils down to.

The only thing that X had been aiming for:

“That is to say, X welcomes the idea of playing with Suzune.”

He had used valuable information obtained from the spy for that purpose alone.

“This kind of situation... I don’t understand. Class C was saved by X, who we don’t even know.”

Ryūen was different from Ibuki. He knew why X had done such a thing.

“Kuku..... that is to say, he does not intend to reveal himself.”

As long as Ryūen tracks down the source of the audio file, Class D’s X will eventually be forced to show his face.

If Ryūen got desperate enough, he could even ask the school, which manages all the phones, to provide him with the email and call records, and he would then thoroughly investigate and discover X’s identity.

At the same time, he did not feel an obsession with rising to Class A from X. He didn’t feel like X had the desire to move upwards, this was the conclusion Ryūen had come to.

At the same time, he also came to another conclusion.

“Well, we’ve gotten a bit derailed, so let’s get back to the point. I’m not sure what method he used, but the fact remains that ‘X is someone who thinks like me’, and he has made someone in this class spy for him. Because otherwise, he couldn’t have gotten his hands on the audio file. However, the premise is that X’s true identity will remain hidden even if we find the spy. If the spy knew his identity, this game would be over the moment I find them. Because of this, in order to be able to conduct espionage, mail or other exchanges of communication would be necessary. Although it’s not impossible for them to be

using old-fashioned letters to communicate, that method would be very limited and inefficient.”

“But there was no evidence on anyone’s cell phone. Are you sure you didn’t skip over any details?”

“Of course. I looked at the phones as a matter of principle. It was only for done for the sake of appearances.”

“Huh? You said you’d know who the spy is if you just looked at the phones. Right?”

“Think about it carefully. If you were the spy, would you risk leaving a suspicious mail on your phone?”

“I... would not. Because of that, I had thought that checking the phones like this was a waste of time.”

“Right. If you think about it, checking the classes cellphones is an obvious result of this. It’s not incredibly difficult to destroy the evidence. Even if the spy didn’t think to destroy it, X would have certainly instructed them to do so. In other words, the spy attempted to look innocent by willingly letting me look at their phone. It follows that those who refused to show me their cellphones are clearly innocent, and the spy wouldn’t have taken that chance.”

Because of this, those who had refused to let Ryūen look at the contents of their cellphones such as Nishino and the others, were inevitably excluded from his search. If someone isn’t the spy, it ultimately doesn’t matter if they’re under suspicion. It was a stunt that was possible simply because there were people

who were able to speak up. Of course, Ryūen could have also just simply checked the contents of their mobile phones to eliminate the small possibility that he was wrong, but it would have only provoked his classmates. This tactic was selected because he was relying on power to dominate the class. Even if he had to bear some risks, his plans worked out in the end.

Because he hadn't looked at each cell phone for a meaningful amount of time, he had effectively told the students of Class C that he hadn't looked at the details of their private lives at all. What Ryūen was looking for in the phones was not the presence or absence of suspicious mail, instead, he was looking to see the extent at which the spy was dominated by their invisible partner, and how much they feared them. And what he saw from that...

"I'm going to ask the spy again."

Ryūen looked at each person's eyes and movements one by one.

"Are you afraid of the unknown X? Or of me? Ask yourself which one is truly terrible to make into an enemy. Are you making a mistake? Remember when the admissions ceremony was over? What happens to the people who resist me? Right, Ishizaki?"

"Y-Yes....."

Ishizaki slightly shivered after being mentioned. Albert who always calmly stood at Ryūen's side also gave a slight reaction. In the beginning, nobody consented to Ryūen's orders. Both Ishizaki and Albert had initially protested against him, but in the end, they both gave in to the 'violence' that Ryūen exerted. Ishizaki had far more fighting experience, while Albert clearly had superior physical strength.

However, it was these two men who had fallen to the ground in the end.

“The strongest force in the world is ‘violence’ when it’s fully committed. I will not succumb to authority. Even if the school tries to expel me, I’d be certain to kill the traitor before it happens. Do you understand what I mean? If I end up expelled because of this betrayal, I will make sure to stomp the life out of this spy like the insect they are.”

This was different from the former student council president Horikita or the current president Nagumo who had dominated the gymnasium with authority.

Instead, Ryūen marched forward in a frenzy of violence.

“I will welcome the confession of the traitor now, but this will be your last chance. If you are to confess now, I promise to not get caught up on this betrayal, and vow to prevent your classmates from accusing you in the future. As I had said in the beginning, if you believe in and obey me, I will lead this class to Class A. As long as you follow me, I will protect you.”

Ryūen stepped down from the podium and stood in front of the classroom, watching the eyes of his classmates.

His words gave off the feeling that they were addressed to the entire class, and not just the spy in question.

“Do you understand? What it means to offend me?”

He stared into the eyes of his classmates one by one. For Ryūen, this was the easiest way to find the traitor.

Then, Ryūen finally walked over to a female student and stood before her.

Of course, this wasn't by chance. Ryūen had set her as the target from the beginning.

“What’s wrong? Can you not look into my eyes?”

“Ah..... A-A..... I.....”

Her breathing was disorderly, and she had a face that was about to burst into tears.

“Kuku. It’s you, Manabe, Class C’s traitor.”

Most students hadn’t imagined it to be her, and were unable to understand this unexpected revelation.

“Don’t be so afraid, Manabe. You didn’t take the initiative to report it to me, but I knew you were the spy from the beginning. Your complexion has been bad from the start. There was no way for you to hide it.”

Ryūen smoothed out her hair next to her ear and touched her face. Manabe began trembling as if she were exposed to the extreme cold.

“Please. Sorry, I’m sorry, I---”

“Don’t worry, I’ll forgive you. I’ll handle this with magnanimity. So let’s hear it. Tell me the true nature of X who had you betray me.”

Ryūen turned from Shiho Manabe and shot a sharp glance to her friends Nanami Yabu and Saki Yamashita.

(Part 1 End)

(Part 2)

After holding everyone in Class C hostage, Ryūen finally allowed most of the class to leave.

Those who remained in the classroom started with Ryūen, Ishizaki, Kaneda, Ibuki, as well as the three traitors.

“Question: Do you know the identity of the guy who gave you instructions?”

Manabe and the others denied the question by shaking their heads from side to side.

“Well, next question: What are your reasons for betraying Class C? Explain it to me.”

“That is--”

“There’s no use to concealing it now. If you choose to hide it anyways, then tomorrow is when your time as my classmates' end and you’ll be treated like nothing more than maggots.”

In a situation where there is no longer any escape, Manabe would decide to come clean with the truth.

“D..... Karuizawa of Class D, do you know.....?”

“Just the name and her face, she's Hirata's woman right?”

“That girl, she is acting strong right now... but I believe she was a victim of bullying in the past.”

“Oh? Then?”

“Rika was treated terribly by Karuizawa, so we attempted to retaliate...”

Even though Manabe was scared, she spoke about the events that happened during the summer on the cruise ship. From how they were members of the same group in the special test, to how they had found out about her past with bullying, and even the violent act of revenge that they took part in. She spoke of everything.

She also brought up that the reason for their spying was due to threats being made from the other side with evidence.

If the facts were to come to light, they would be subjected to expulsion or even worse. And, of course, they would receive a scolding from Ryūen as well. She said it was something that had to be done in order to avoid punishment from both the school as well as Ryūen.

“Indeed. You've been having a lot of fun.”

“Are you an idiot? They’re being threatened by a guy who they don’t even know the identity of. Don’t you know that things might get even worse from here?”

“Don’t blame them, Ibuki. When humans are cornered, they turn into vulnerable creatures.”

Ryūen had decided to forgive Manabe and didn’t continue to accuse them.

“Here’s the bottom line: Did anyone else witness the scene where you had bullied Karuizawa?”

Manabe nodded to the question and uttered the names.

“At that time, we were seen by two students from Class D. Yukimura-kun and Ayanokōji-kun.”

The names of two students emerged.

“A picture was sent to us afterward. A photograph of when we were involved with Karuizawa.”

“So that’s how it is. I had expected there to be evidence since you were being threatened, but for the photograph to have been taken back then... What happened to this photo?”

“I deleted it. If somebody saw it... We would...”

“So the situation has reached its conclusion.”

“So it’s a definitely either Yukimura-shi and Ayanokōji-shi?”

Said Kaneda, who hadn’t spoken on the situation until now.

He was one of the few people in Class C who Ryūen considered to be of any use.

“Wait a moment, Ryūen. I don’t know much about Yukimura, but I don’t believe Ayanokōji is the one pulling the strings for Class D. I’ve had the chance to interact with him a few times, and he didn’t strike me as that kind of guy.”

“Yukimura does seem a little suspicious in that sense. He seems to be quite capable at academics.”

Ishizaki added.

“Isn’t it impossible to come to a conclusion like that? Ayanokōji-shi is always together with Horikita-shi. Besides, Ayanokōji-shi had been hiding his running ability at the sports festival. I think the more suspicious of the two would have to be him.”

“I think the two of them are irrelevant. Ayanokōji just has a quick foot and Yukimura just has his grades, right? I think that there would be more to the mastermind.”

“Who else could it be?”

“There are some really capable guys in Class D. Someone like Hirata.”

“That guy? I speak to him pretty often and I don’t think he’s that kind of person.”

Ryūen smiled slightly at his classmates who had been speaking freely.

But in the next moment, his hand smashed down on the desk.

“Shut up a little.”

Ryūen let out a small laugh as the room was instantly enveloped in silence and terror.

“Did I ask for even a single word of your opinions? I will find the guy who is manipulating Class D from the shadows. You all are just my pawns for that goal. Small fry should act like small fry. Looking at the facts, only Ayanokōji or Yukimura could have taken the picture. However, coming to the conclusion that one of them have to be the mastermind is unreasonable. They may also be under the influence of someone.”

This was the main issue. There was a decent chance that one, or both, of them had taken the picture of a situation that they thought could turn into a weakness of Class C, and then sought advice from the person running things behind the scenes.

“But, Ryūen-shi. Especially regarding Ayanokōji-shi, shouldn’t we be suspicious?”

Fully prepared to incur Ryūen’s anger, Kaneda dared to give some input because he believed it was necessary.

“That’s right.”

Regarding Ayanokōji, he was suspicious because of his relations with Suzune Horikita.

However, this was a cause for suspicion in and of itself.

It was unpleasant to come to easy deductions like that.

The idea that the man who was near Horikita Suzune was also the man who was manipulating everything as the mastermind of Class D.

If he had intended to use Suzune from the beginning, he would have never chosen this tactic.

“He’s hidden in plain sight huh? No, I can’t really imagine that.”

The feeling of desperation was an unpleasant one.

“I’m gonna use him.”

If the situation has already progressed to such an extent, the rest is certainly just one push away.

In order to make the next move, Ryūen sent a message to the person registered on the cell phone.

Name	Haruka Hasebe (長谷部 波瑠加, <i>Hasebe Haruka</i>)	
Class	1st Year, Class D	
ID #	S01T004747	
Club	None	
Birthday	November 5th	
Academic Ability	D	
Intellect	C+	
Judgement	C+	
Physical Ability	D	
Teamwork	D	

Interviewer's Evaluation

Her attitude towards her elders is a bit of a problem. In addition, she shows an excessively clear-cut difference between the things she's good at and the things she isn't good at, as well as what she likes and doesn't like. Because of her relatively high concentration, we hope she can develop this strong point of hers and learn to study meticulously in all aspects of her school life.

Homeroom Teacher Records

Since this student hasn't participated in physical education classes on multiple occasions, I am in the process of educating her.

Chapter 4: Means of Survival

(Introduction)

After the start of homeroom at 18:00, Chabashira-sensei left the classroom immediately.

The students of the class were sitting there in wonder, Hirata shot them a side glance as he went to stand up at the podium.

We weren't looking to play any games now. A serious discussion was about to begin.

"For today's homeroom, I would like to hold a meeting for tomorrow's quiz. I have gotten permission from Chabashira-sensei, who has told me that today's homeroom time is free for us to use. First of all, Horikita-san, would you please?"

As if waiting for Hirata's words, Horikita got up quietly and stood next to Hirata.

For her to go and stand side by side with Hirata, some of the students probably began to feel a sense of incompatibility. Many may not have realized until now that "Horikita" and "Hirata" made up Class D's strongest team. Hirata had always welcomed her, but Horikita had never allowed for it. Horikita always fought alone and acted with the belief that she could win without the help of others.

However, after the failure she suffered at the sports festival, she understood the limits of fighting alone, and it was as if she was reborn.

Of course, not everything has become perfect.

The Swiss biologist A. Portman has said that humans are physiologically premature. He argues that, from the point of view of zoology, humans are born about a year early compared to the developmental states of other mammals. Although human beings are classified as large animals, when a baby is born, its sensory organs have already been developed, while its athletic ability is immature and they're not able to walk on their own. Other large animals on the other hand, such as deer, are mature when they are born, and there are many other isolated creatures who leave their nests and live on their own.

As is the case with this example, now Horikita has just been reborn, and is not able to move around on her own yet.

However, although very immature, she also contains infinite possibilities.

She could grow up in any way moving forward.

Perhaps Horikita's heart is still conflicted. She's probably trying desperately to struggle against it.

It would be for the best for her to surrender herself to this change and commit to it.

“.....First of all, although this is a thing of the past, I hope you will let me apologize for something.”

I thought she would start talking about the final exam right away, but she didn't. There seems to have been something smoldering in Horikita's heart for several weeks now.

“During the sports festival, I didn't manage to bring us any results. I always have a tough attitude with everyone, but I was ultimately unable to do anything for Class D. Please allow me to apologize.”

After saying so, Horikita bowed her head deeply. Of course, many students were shaken by this appearance.

It was as if Horikita had accepted the blame for the reasons behind Class D's defeat.

After the three legged race, Onodera had become a little estranged from Horikita and quickly spoke:

“It's not Horikita-san's sole responsibility for the loss. You don't need to lower your head.”

“That's right, Suzune. After all, Haruki and Professor weren't much help either.”

Although it's pitiful, it was also true. Yamauchi glared at Sudō, but there was no objection.

“A humble attitude can make any outcome acceptable, regardless of whether we won or lost. But that’s not the case here. At least, my contribution to the sports festival had hardly any positives.”

After saying so, Horikita glanced at Sudō’s face for a moment. It was probably nothing other than to supplement that she had made a friend of Sudō. It would be impossible for Sudō to not understand the mood. He shyly scratched his cheek a little, quietly revealing a smile and his white teeth.

“But this is the end of the apology. I would like to fully commit to challenging this next quiz and the final exam. I believe that unless the class is to fight as a unit, it will be insurmountable.”

“I can understand that, but do you have a solution or something? Like how the partners are chosen. We don’t know about that, do we?”

“No, the rules for how partners are chosen have already been made clear. If we handle this well, it is possible for all of us to have an ideal partner. Hirata-kun, if you would.”

Hirata, who had turned to the support role, received her signal and wrote out the pairing rules on the blackboard.

The rules of pairing

When looking at the class as a whole, the person who scores the highest and the person who scores the lowest on the quizzes will be matched with each other.

Then the second best and worst students, the third best and worst students and so on.

For example: The student who gets 100 points will be matched with the student who gets 0 points. The student who gets 99 points will be matched with the student who gets 1 point.

“This is the meaning of the quiz and the pairing principle. Simple, isn’t it?”

“Oh, oh my! This is the rule of pairing! You’ve done it, Horikita! You’re amazing!”

“This is something that many of the students should have also discovered. The important thing is this. Based on this rule, we can also see that students who get lower grades will be partnered with those who get higher ones almost by default. However, exceptions can always happen. Due to this, I’m going to start explaining the strategy for reliable and precise pairings.”

Although she said that many students should have discovered this already, this was not the case. Compared to past hints, this one was indeed easy-to-understand. But she might have noticed it only because of her experience with her past failures.

Horikita walked next to Hirata and turned back to face the classroom.

The feeling of embarrassment and dislike for speaking in public.

She had no such resistance at all in her heart, only the drive to move forward.

“Taking into consideration the results from our classes tests so far, I’d like to focus on having the students who are worried about their scores make plans with the students getting good grades. Although in the end there will be some students who are uneasy, the reality of the situation is that we cannot support everyone.”

11 students were averaging 80 points or more, with the exception of those who attained perfect marks on the midterms. If that average was increased to 90 points, the number of students would be reduced to 6. It’s a sad thing to think about the content of the tests which have been comparatively easy. The number of students with excellent grades was less than half the class.

On the contrary, even if you take into account the number of scores averaging over 60 points, not everyone would be able to be matched with an ideal partner... In other words, it’s impossible for every pair to have a high-scoring student.

Therefore, Horikita appears to be aiming for stability by creating mandatory teams of 10 people at the top and bottom of the class.

The names of the students with lower grades were listed on the blackboard one by one.

“Well, I don’t quite understand. What should we do?”

Asked Yamauchi, who knew his name would be written.

“The 10 students written here can just write their names on tomorrow's quizzes. Since your scores will not be reflected on your report card, taking a 0 on the quiz doesn’t have any disadvantages. Conversely, to the top 10 people, please be sure to score 85 points or more. The remaining 20 students are equally divided into 10 people. For the upper half of these students, your grade should be aimed at a maximum of 80 points, while for the lower half, you only need to score 1 point. With this method, the optimal balance for the final exams should be automatically achieved. However, I will confirm the details of this later since there is also the possibility that accidents will happen.”

The important thing here is to make sure that the students taking a 0 and the students scoring a 1 are not paired with each other.

The students with differences in academic ability must be paired up as much as possible.

“I also think this strategy is very good. We shouldn’t challenge the exam without having taken any countermeasures.”

Hirata had discussed this with her beforehand, so there should be no negative comments about the plan. His aim was to create a favorable atmosphere.

Kōenji usually didn't consent with things like this, but he showed neither affirmation nor denial.

Rather, he seemed uninterested in the chain of conversation. His ability to integrate into the class was even worse than Horikita's. But this time he maintained his typical attitude which is probably for the best.

Although Kōenji usually doesn't take the special tests seriously, he would always avoid situations where he would be at risk for dropping out.

This time, for the case of the "mandatory pairing", he wouldn't get poor grades. While the chances of it are low, there is a chance you might get expelled even you get a few perfect marks on the finals, depending on the capability of your partner.

Due to this, though he would pretend not to be interested, he would probably be willing to cooperate with the exam.

No, Kōenji's behavior might not be readable. There's the possibility that he'll end up doing something unpredictable.

"Kōenji-kun. Do you have any objections?"

"I have no objections, that was really a nonsense question. Of course, I have already mastered the contents of this exam."

He stretched his long legs onto his desk as usual and smoothed his hair back.

"Well, can I expect you to indeed score more than 80 points?"

"What do you think? Wouldn't that depend on the content of the test?"

“If you deliberately score 0 points and get matched up with another student with high grades, there will be a risk of a breakdown in the overall balance for the class. Could you at least understand this, if anything?”

The only thing to be afraid of for these quizzes is an abnormal score. A highly-capable pair like Horikita and Kōenji being created must be avoided.

“I’ll consider it carefully. Girl.”

Even though Kōenji’s answer was really suspicious, she couldn’t pursue the topic now.

Because we have to control the points of the official final exam.

(Intro End.)

(Part 1)

The next day, the time of the quizzes arrived.

I thought that we would begin immediately, but Chabashira-sensei addressed the class first.

“The quiz will start here in a moment, but I have something to report on before that happens. The class that you had nominated to attack for the final exams, Class C, was approved as it did not conflict with the choices from any other classes.”

“Did Class A and Class B both nominate Class D? Regardless, it’s great that we’re able to attack the unstudious Class C without leaving luck and misfortune up to the heavens.”

It seems that we’ve surpassed the first hurdle, and Horikita was relieved. Next would be finding out which class would be attacking Class D.

“Then, the class that will be attacking Class D was also determined to be Class C. This was also because their nomination had no conflicts with other classes.”

Put differently, this battle is in the form of Class C versus Class D, and Class B versus Class A.

“It’s an ideal combination.”

“Seems like it.”

There were no conflicting name selections, which means that the upper classes had both chosen to attack their closest rivals in order to expand, or shrink, the difference between each other. It was such a case.

What can be seen from this, is that Class A’s nomination was decided by

Sakayanagi. Katsuragi would have nominated Class D, which would have given them the highest chances of winning.

Furthermore, it can also be predicted that the overall influence of Katsuragi is declining.

Class C was selected as our nomination just as Horikita desired.

“Even though we're about to take a quiz, Ike and Yamauchi look entirely fine. Before tests, you two usually have dark circles under your eyes. Do you have some form of secret strategy this time?”

“Hehehe. Please watch carefully, sensei.”

Ike was full of confidence, but it was as expected. After all, he hadn't done any studying.

What he should be afraid of would be getting a partial score on the quiz. The difficulty level of the content seemed to be incredibly low, but if you don't understand a single question, all you can do is write your name and hand it in as a blank sheet. If he was to take this unique quiz seriously it would only go to increase his risks in the future.

There was no way Chabashira-sensei would be unable to see this.

“Don't regret your decision afterward. You should face this quiz seriously.”

“I am serious. After all, it doesn't affect my grades, right?”

“Of course. There will be no reflection on your grades.”

“Then I can be at peace with not having to get a high score.”

“That's only if it goes how you're expecting it to.”

Towards her ambiguous response, Ike and the others who hadn't chosen to study fell silent for a moment.

“Should we aim for good scores on this quiz...?”

Sudō unintentionally lost his peace of mind due to her words.

“Don't let her fool you. There is no mistake in our plan.”

The collected words from Horikita managed to calm the worried students. Sudō regained his composure in an instant.

“.....Also. I just have to believe in Suzune.”

Chabashira-sensei witnessed the situation, confirmed that the atmosphere in the class had been restored, and then picked up the quiz handouts.

“Well then, we will start the quizzes. Please remember not to cheat. If caught cheating, regardless of whether it influences your grades or not, we will impose a merciless penalty.”

Sensei handed the examination paper to the front of each row and let us pass it back.

Since we were told to keep it face down until it starts, I flipped the quiz over immediately after it was handed to me.

“Are you not worried about it? About whether or not the pair selection method you came to is correct?”

“No. I am confident about it this time.”

There was no sign that Horikita was swayed by Chabashira-sensei’s words. Because of this, Ike and the others weren’t swayed as well.

If the leader shows fear or hesitation, those emotions will easily begin to spread.

A symbol of change. The students began to shape into an entirely new Class D.

It was only a little bit, but I think this was transmitted to the homeroom teacher who faced the students every day.

“Begin.”

The quiz started at her signal.

I slowly overturned the quiz papers.

“Oh...”

I couldn't help but make a sound. I probably wasn't even the only one surprised. Although the difficulty was expected to be very low, it turned out even lower than that.

It was at a level where even students in the upper grades of primary school would be able to answer. Of course, there were some questions with increased difficulty, but even then someone like Ike could easily score above a 60 as long as they didn't panic.

It's a sweet trap. A disaster easily could have happened had we absentmindedly jumped into it. But due to Horikita's strategy, Class D wouldn't end up with unreasonable results.

(Part 1 End)

(Part 2)

The quizzes ended smoothly without any problems. The results were announced after the 4th period the next day.

Class D had challenged all of their tests in the past without any form of unity.

Whereas this time, the quizzes had produced a sense of unity that was almost too well done.

Pairing system, problem creation, and inter-class competition aside, it may be a wonderful thing that the overall rule for this special examination is so simple. Just take a test and get good grades.

This is the same thing as what we have been forced to repeat over the past nine years or more since we had started in elementary school and all the way through high school.

“It’s good that I didn’t have to get involved with this time.”

It's comforting to be able to say this from the bottom of my heart.

“Then, I will announce the pairings for this semester’s final exams.”

The results of yesterday’s quiz were posted and it went as follows:

Horikita Suzune and Ken Sudō, Hirata Yōsuke and Yamauchi Haruki, Kushida Kikyō and Ike Kanji, Yukimura Teruhiko and Inogashira Kokoro.

The pairs were announced almost as we had expected. By the way, my results said:

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka..... Satō Maya.

“The gods have a bad sense of humor...”

How did it come to this? It was the kind of outcome that would cause me to think like that.

Satō seemed to notice that we had been paired up together and looked back in my direction with a smile.

I raised my hand a little to let her know I had seen it too.

“Kōenji-kun also hasn’t betrayed our expectations of him.”

Kōenji was paired with Okitani. Based on the result, he seems to have gotten a solidly high score.

Well, he’s gotten high scores on every exam that he takes so far, so it’s more like he is just taking the exam as usual. He didn’t pay attention to the result, crossed his arms with an incomprehensible smile, and laughed.

“Looking at the results, some of you seem to have understood the intent of the quiz. It then follows that this information was successfully shared with the rest of the class.”

Chabashira-sensei looked at the pairing list and appeared to be very impressed.

“Pair the students with the highest and lowest scores. If the results are the same, the partners will be randomly selected. I probably don’t need to explain it to you all, but I’ll tell you this anyways.”

There’s no reason to be surprised at this point, but it was relieving for our rule to be validated.

“There doesn’t seem to be any issues with the pairings.”

“Yes. It’s going so smooth that I’m a bit scared. But the real thing starts now. How to make exam problems and overcome the exams on our own. Your pairing is Satō-san, which should be fine.”

I didn’t select her deliberately, but with the upper and lower students combined, the other half of the students in the class are likely to score outside of the predicted strategy. A result like this can be said to be just right.

Satō is a candidate who could potentially fail the final. I have to keep my grades at a high level moving forward.

“In order to raise the classes average score, I will hold a study group until the final exam. Because I can cooperate with Hirata-kun and Kushida-san this time, I’ll be able to hold two sessions per day. A two-hour session from 4 pm to 6 pm after school ends, and 2 hours from 8 pm to 10 pm for those with club activities. We need to decide who will take which session. What do you think, Hirata-

kun?”

“Since I’m involved with club activities, I’ll take over the second study session. Let’s get through this and work hard.”

Things were truly moving steadily. Because of the increase in the number of people who can teach, we can adopt a strategy like this.

After that, Horikita and Hirata discussed the details of the study sessions again and again, slowly ironing out the finer details.

The supervision of the first session was taken up by Horikita, while Hirata took over the second session. They decided to thoroughly guide the students who were struggling with their grades, while still supporting all of the students who attended the study groups. Kushida was a special force who would attend both sessions and focus on teaching the students who were anxious about reaching 50 points. There were a lot of girls sitting in this middle tier, such as Onodera and Ichihashi.

That said, this plan was not without problems.

Compared to the first semester, the number of students involved in the study group is pretty large. In contrast, there are only three people in charge of teaching.

It follows that the larger the student side of the teacher-student ratio gets, the poorer the quality the overall teaching will be.

At lunchtime, Hirata and Sudō met up with Horikita.

“Fuck, Suzune isn’t leading the second session. That kills my motivation.”

Since Sudō couldn’t attend the first session due to his club activities, he couldn’t be taught by Horikita this time.

Horikita worked as Sudō’s motive to study, so he seemed pretty reluctant. In the past, he would have probably acted out here.

“No matter who is teaching, if you lack motivation, I will be troubled. Understand?”

“.....I understand. I’ll study, after all, we are a pair.”

She had great control over the bulky Sudō. It was admirable.

“Your efforts will also be reflected in my own evaluation. It would be nice if you would understand that. On top of that, I will try to show up at the evening sessions, so come on.”

Horikita put forward the final blow, as if Sudō was in the palm of her hand.

“Oh wow. I suddenly have the motivation again! Please treat me well, Hirata.”

“Likewise. Let’s do this together, Sudō-kun.”

Because of his decision to become partners with Horikita, Sudō seems to be

more driven.

But still, there were unexpected problems.

“.....I need to talk to you for a minute, alright?”

The student who came up to Horikita was someone who I had never spoken to before.

He came over with a nervous, sorry-looking expression.

“Miyake-kun, what’s wrong?”

He was a student of Class D, Miyake Akito, and he was with a girl whose beauty was a common topic among the boys of the class, Hasebe.

These two students were usually very quiet and rarely involved themselves with anyone. It was an unexpected visit from an unexpected combination.

“I remember you two, you guys are a team for the final exams, right?”

Hirata asked, looking for a common point to start with. Miyake began to talk about the situation.

“We are a pair for the upcoming exam, but based on the results we got on the quizzes and midterms, we are good and bad at the same subjects, so there’s a bit of a problem. It’s a little nerve-racking. We wanted to ask for advice.”

After he finished, he handed their quiz results and midterm results to Hirata.

The pair had decided to compare the results of their quizzes with each other. Their average score was very different, with Miyake getting 79 points, and Hasebe getting a single point as intended. Horikita's plan worked smoothly to get good pairs for the students in the upper and lower parts of the class. But there was a miscalculation here. For the mid-term exams, their average scores were 65 points and 63 points, for Miyake and Hasebe respectively. They have almost no difference in their academic ability. They're two students who are in the very middle of the class but were split into the upper and lower sections. At first glance, the two of them would seem to be able to manage the final exams, but there's a catch.

The tendency for both of them to make the same mistake on a question was too similar. In other words, the subjects that they aren't good at are exactly the same. Sixty points in each subject will be required for the final exams. It will be a dangerous bridge to cross.

"Indeed, this is a bit unexpected. Let's make sure to check the other pairings later."

"I'm sorry to trouble you again, Hirata. Whether it's the cruise or the sports festival, I always seem to give you trouble."

"You don't need to apologize. You would do the same if I were the one who needed help."

Was that what happened? Miyake had withdrawn from the sports festival just before the final relay race due to an injured leg. He seems to have made a full

recovery as there were no problems with his movement.

I happened to recall this kind of thing, but I don't know the specific details.

Miyake and Hasebe, the answers that they chose were very similar.

They were so similar that one might think the same person had taken both exams.

Even if it's possible to adjust someone's academic ability to some extent, it isn't possible to get every student into their ideal pairing. It's unavoidable that an incompatible match would be created.

"This will be hard. I don't want to complicate the plans we set up or disrupt the progression of the study groups."

It's not that they were too stupid to be able to study for the test. The problem was that the two of them had their weaknesses and strengths heavily skewed. It was a special type of situation that was somewhat different from Sudō's which was that he was simply not good at studying.

As a result, the quality of the teaching will become less and less adequate.

Originally it would be ideal to teach lessons one-on-one.

"Kushida-san, can I trouble you with some additional students? There will be a lot of people to tutor, but these two should have some foundation for studying. They shouldn't diminish the overall coordination of the study group."

“Yup. I don’t mind, as long as Miyake-kun and Hasebe-san don’t mind either?”

Kushida asked the two of them. Miyake didn’t say anything, but Hasebe was different.

“I’ll pass. I don’t like being around Ichihashi-san.”

She refused in response. Fortunately, Ichihashi had left the classroom, so the conversation wasn’t overheard.

“It’s also not comfortable for me to attend a study group with a lot of people.”

It seems that Miyake had suggested to Haruka to for them to ask Hirata together.

I had thought she would be apathetic about it, but it seems that she ended up disagreeing with Miyake altogether.

“But, the two of you share the same weaknesses. Even if you are able to clear the overall score requirement, if you are to take the final exams like this, there is a real possibility that one of your subjects will be below the minimum requirement of 60 points.”

“Yep, I know.”

Hasebe gave off a look of dissatisfaction and took her gaze off Horikita. She

then turned her back on us and began to walk away.

“Where are you going?”

“Miyatchi. I’m sorry you took the time to invite me. I feel pretty embarrassed, but in the end, this is not something I’m cut out for.”

Refusing once again, Hasebe left the classroom alone.

“Sorry, Horikita.”

“I don’t care. Even if it’s just you, would you mind working with Kushida-san?”

If Miyake was to work to compensate for his worst subjects, he could effectively cover for Hasebe.

“.....I’ll pass. I don’t feel like I’d be able to study in a group full of women. I’ll try to do it on my own.”

Miyake gave his own response and withdrew as well after grabbing his bag off the seat. Horikita could not force them to study. If they didn’t participate in the study session of their own will, it would be nearly impossible to get any results, and it would lower the moral of the students who were taking the studying seriously.

“What should we do? If we can, I think it would be better to provide some support for those two.”

“That’s right..... If only there was someone else who could participate in teaching them.”

I saw Horikita looking at me for an instant, so I declined her with my eyes. I don’t believe that I can communicate with Miyake or Hasebe, not even considering whether or not I have any teaching skills.

My existence shouldn’t be considered after that point.

“I’ll try to adjust and see whether or not I can make time.”

After some thought, Horikita concluded that she had no choice but to make a move herself, and attempted to sum things up.

“I’m against the idea. When I think of the long war that will be coming in the future, you will undoubtedly be overworking yourself. As a result, the overall efficiency of learning for everyone will drop. Horikita also has to work on creating problems for Class C as well.”

“But if there’re no other options, what choice do we have?”

Horikita’s speech had become forceful since she had judged that there wasn’t anyone else who could teach them.

Even though Hirata could advise her not to do this, he had no means available to stop her.

Horikita will look after Miyake. It was beginning to appear as though the

matter was decided.

“Then I’ll take care of it.”

A student who hadn’t been involved in the discussion so far approached the group.

The one who joined the discussion was Yukimura.

“Yukimura-kun, if you’re willing to cooperate, I’d be glad to welcome you. You work hard in school and definitely have the appropriate academic ability. But are you fine with this? I thought that you didn’t care for this kind of interaction.”

“At least, if I don’t cooperate, it doesn’t seem like we will overcome this exam. Horikita, you’re the same way, trying to take on everything by yourself.”

It might be that Yukimura is choosing to act because he saw the changes that have happened with Horikita since the sports festival.

“But there’s one other problem. I can teach, but I don’t have any ties with Miyake or Hasebe. I think it would be tricky or impossible for me to try to convince the two of them. I want you to come up with a way to convince the two of them to come to my study session.”

He attached the condition that we would have to bring the two of them with us.

Of course, there was no such thing as a condition. Thankfully, Horikita was delighted with the arrival of a helper.

He was like a movie companion, coming out of the sky in a helicopter to rescue the main character who had been driven into the corner by enemy soldiers.

“I understand. I will think about how to gather the two of them for you.”

After Yukimura had made the minimum promise with Horikita, he left the classroom as if nothing had happened.

“Is it okay for me to think of things as okay for the time being?”

“Not necessarily. Think about it, none of us have any connections with either of the two of them.”

I couldn't stop myself from pointing it out to her, so I did.

“.....Hirata-kun, will they listen to Yukimura-kun?”

“I wonder..... I think you know this already, but the three of them are the type of people who like solitude. It will have to do with whether or not they match with Yukimura's personality or way of thinking. They might end up being a little uneasy about it.”

Horikita sat in thought considering what Hirata said, and after a bit, she eventually turned to me.

“Hey, Ayanokōji-kun. Would you mind if I left the management of Yukimura-kun to you?”

“Management?”

“You were in the same room as Yukimura-kun on the ship, so I thought you might be somewhat flexible. It may be difficult for you to communicate with Miyake-kun or Hasebe-san, but if you work as the middleman it should be easier for all of us to connect with them.”

She said such a thing. Using the process of elimination, it was clearly the best plan available. None of the three of them appeared to be the type of person who would be able to stay in touch with Horikita.

Even so, why choose me of all people? I’ve entirely pleased with not getting any more involved with this than I already am.

“You appear to be rather unwilling. Are you not willing to help me? It’s just management, I didn’t say I wanted you to teach.”

It’s true that it’s just management, but it will be a very difficult thing to manage.

“Can I ask this of you?”

I can only nod my head as the pressure from Horikita had begun to change into a threat.

Let's renew my mindset here.

Accepting this matter can help Horikita save face, and the backup plan isn't entirely useless.

The important thing is that I'm not made to do anything further than this. The most troublesome task here would be to teach others and thinking of problems for the final exams.

"I'll try my best."

I gave her my answer and sighed in a manner so as not to be seen by Horikita.

(Part 2 End)

(Part 3)

After school, I started to take action immediately. I spoke with Yukimura and then got in contact with Miyake. We all agreed to hold a study group. I had asked Hirata in advance and got prior consent from the two of them.

"What about Hasebe?"

As soon as class was over, Hasebe vanished from the classroom without anyone noticing.

“Did she run away?”

Yukimura muttered a bit angrily.

“Hasebe isn’t that kind of girl, perhaps she left ahead of us?”

“Why would she leave first?”

“Eh, there could be a variety of reasons.”

Miyake appeared to understand Hasebe well, so he wasn’t particularly worried.

For the time being, we headed towards Pallet which was the planned meeting place for the study group.

Then, in the middle of the corridor along the way, we came across Hasebe.

“Why did you head out without us?”

As soon as Yukimura saw Hasebe, he asked her.

“Should I say that I don’t want to attract attention? It’s a little inconvenient for me to stay in class.”

She answered him ambiguously. Yukimura seems to have taken it personally.

“Are you saying you would hate to be seen talking to us?”

“It’s not like that. I just have a lot of difficulties with it.”

“Don’t worry, Yukimura. Hasebe is always like this.”

“The seats will all be taken while we stand here and talk. So in the meantime, why don’t we get going?”



I understand Yukimura's feelings and that he's getting irritated, but we should put that aside for the time being.

In fact, now that school has ended, students would start to gather at Pallet.

"That's right... It would be troublesome if all of the seats were taken. Let's go."

Yukimura quickly regained his composure and took the lead.

"You should pay a little bit more attention to what you say."

"Was what I was saying really so unpleasant? I'll reflect on this a little."

It seems that Hasebe wasn't intending to be rude.

We managed to secure four seats and reorganized the situation.

"Uh, well, in short, please advise me."

Yukimura sat next to me, with Hasebe across the table. Miyake sat next to Hasebe.

I don't know how this gathering managed to happen or how it turned out this way, but the group of 4 had managed to come together despite the atmosphere of discomfort.

“If you have any questions, I’ll hear them out first.”

After I said this, the only female in the group, Hasebe, rose her hand lightly and said:

“So Ayanokōji-kun can talk?”

“.....Is that really the question you chose to ask?

Hasebe looks up at me as if intrigued. It’s apparently incredible that I was talking and speaking to them.

“How do I put it... I didn’t have any impression of you at all. Are you the type of student who isn’t even noticed when you’re absent?”

I haven’t had many conversations with Hasebe. Even if I had made an impression, there was no way for her to know much. After hearing her comment, Miyake brings up the topic of the sports festival.

“But the way he ran as the anchor at the relay race was awesome. Because of that one event, Ayanokōji became the center of attention of the school.”

“I wanted to see it. But I went to the restroom and missed Ayanokōji-kun’s race. So for me, it feels a little strange. Didn’t you race against the former student council president? It seemed to be a hot topic right after the sports festival ended.”

“Were you in the track and field club back in middle school Ayanokōji? After

watching the relay, a talent scout from the track and field club came.”

“Ah, well, I received some solicitation, but I refused.”

After all, that type of motivation to recruit was only temporary, and not something that would go on for long. The people in the track and field club shouldn't be thinking about me anymore. Even if someone is a good runner, if they don't want to take part in club activities, it's meaningless to keep on trying.

“To be honest, I haven't ever done any club activities, so I'm not aware of the situation.”

“Ah really? What a shame.”

As the conversation continued, Yukimura listened without inserting a single word. Hasebe changes the topic over to Miyake without worrying about the state of the situation.

“Miyatchi is in the archery club. Is it fun to shoot a bow every day?”

“I wouldn't do it every day if it wasn't fun. By the way, the bow doesn't get shot, the arrow does.”

He's right.

“I'm not interested in club stuff, like... I'm good with spending my time doing the things I like.”

The two of them are quite different than what I've experienced so far. They were much more talkative than I expected.

"Oh Miyatchi, is it alright for you to miss your club activities?"

"I took time off."

"How brief."

"I will put my time into whatever takes first priority. Archery club isn't very strict so there're no particular penalties."

"Will you all listen to me for a moment? I want to say something before we begin the study session."

Yukimura, who had been listening to the conversation quietly, calmly spoke up. The person his eyes focused in on was neither Hasebe nor Miyake, but me.

"No secrets like back at the sports festival, Ayanokōji"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Studying. I've heard from Horikita that you're plenty capable at it."

".....That woman."

It seems Horikita has given unnecessary information to Yukimura that I was

unaware of.

“I’m relatively good at memorizing things. I think I can score pretty well if I concentrate.”

If I don’t say at least this much, it will be difficult to gain Yukimura’s trust.

“Are you the type who doesn’t do things even though you have the capability to do them?”

“I can’t compare to you, so don’t expect too much of me. I’m not good at teaching.”

“I understand. You should take this seriously so you can get even 1 more point. Since I will be teaching you, you will absolutely get a higher score than you did on the midterms.”

Immediately after, Yukimura proceeded to ask the others:

“Did you bring your test papers from the first semester’s final and the last midterm test as I instructed?”

“Well, yeah.”

Hasebe spoke up, and Miyake nodded. They took the papers out of their bags and handed them to Yukimura.

I look at the papers from the side and confirm their contents. The conclusion that comes from there...

“Both of you are excellent at science, but your results in most of the humanities are devastating.”

Their score in math was around 70 points, which was a relatively high score, but their scores in world history and language averaged around 40. It’s clear that they would be worried if this was left as it is.

“I didn’t think you two were on such good terms with each other, but I did know you both shared such a clear weakness.”

“When I was studying in the library earlier, I was able to speak with Hasebe. That’s the flow of things.”

“Miyatchi and I are pretty independent types. I don’t really wanna become involved with the class.”

These two people held a sense of distance from the class and didn’t belong to any specific group. Was this the reason for their lack of integration with the rest of the class?

“I feel the same in that sense. Even in this group we’re in now, I feel very awkward.”

“So why did you approve of making a group this time?”

“This isn’t exactly a group, per say, it’s more like a study club. If there are only a few people in it, it will be quiet. It doesn’t bother me when I study by myself, so I’ll have to think about finding a new method to study. I’m sorry, but it will take some time for me.”

“Okay. I’ll just wait and have a tea break, alright?”

Hasebe took out her cell phone immediately and began to relax. These days, it’s easy to kill time as long as you have a cell phone. Should I also take out my phone? What should I do in this situation?

I suddenly felt a gaze, and inadvertently sent my own in that direction.

Several boy students were watching us while one of them spoke out to somewhere.

I could recognize the three students. All of them were from Class C. Though I could only remember the name of Ishizaki who stood in the center.

I hope I don’t get caught up in trouble...

However, Ishizaki didn’t come looking for trouble. Although they looked over to us from time to time, they still went to the front of the cake cabinet in Pallet positioned next to the cashier. There is a display of cakes that can be enjoyed with drinks or can be ordered to go. Strawberry Shortcakes and Mont Blanc seem to be the particularly popular options, but I was unaware of the details. The clerk judged that the group in front of him was customers, and appeared to have difficulties hearing the order from the students. The clerk showed no signs that he would be reaching out to the cake cabinet, and his expression gradually

turned nervous and apologetic.

“You can’t think of some way to do it!?”

Ishizaki had become impatient and cried out, and the noisy cafe became much quieter for a bit.

“Even if you insist... for a special order cake, it needs to be mentioned at least a week in advance. It would be very difficult to prepare something the same day.”

After hearing this response from the clerk, Pallet became noisy once again as if nothing had ever happened.

“What was that about?”

As Hasebe twirled her pen between her fingers, she looked towards Ishizaki with a look of disgust.

“Come on. It doesn’t involve us.”

Yukimura didn’t show any interest and was writing something based on the old midterm exams he was given. He was determining their specific weaknesses and planning out what exact measures to take moving forward.

“Cake...”

I wasn't interested in what happened with Ishizaki, but at the same time, it's my birthday tomorrow.

To be honest, I don't have any clear idea of how to spend a birthday like any normal person would. It only meant that I was one year older.

I didn't really know anything. I know that a birthday is a day when someone is celebrated by their family, their lover, and their friends. I just don't understand the emotions someone would feel at that time.

"What's up, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"It's nothing."

Tomorrow is the 20th of October.

There are many students, staff, teachers, and other people in this school.

Even if one or two people were to have the same birthday, it wouldn't be an uncommon thing.

The only difference between them and me is whether or not there would be anyone to celebrate it with.

I wonder if anyone will remember my birthday next year.

(Part 3 End)

(Part 4)

“I’ll go get another cup of coffee.”

“Ooh, me too!”

It had been more than 30 minutes since Yukimura had started to confirm the results of their exams in Pallet. He hasn’t looked up from the papers yet, and it looks like it was going to take a while longer for him to decide on a plan.

Hasebe and Miyake went to the cashier with their empty cups. Pallet had a policy where your second cup would be half price, although only valid on the same day. Pallet sold coffee that was cheap, tasty, and generally impeccable. It seems to be growing in popularity among first-year students. Hasebe and Miyake were already preparing to drink their third cups, but Yukimura, who was absorbed in his work, hadn’t even finished the second half of his first. His attention was completely absorbed by the textbooks, notes, and test papers, considering how to make the best progress for the study group.

“That looks like a lot of work.”

“That’s because I’ve effectively never taught people how to study. I used to teach an idiot how to stay cram until late at night back in middle school, but I

couldn't stand doing that. He didn't have any of the fundamentals, and wasn't able to concentrate on the material very well."

Yukimura set his pen on the table and looked up at the ceiling as if recalling that time.

"Now I can't forget the time that I wasted. I thought it was stupid to teach people how to study. During the first semester, when you and Horikita held a study group to stop those idiots from failing, I was laughing at you in my heart. The same goes for the group made by Hirata. Doesn't it just seem like a waste of time? Someone who doesn't study is almost always someone who hates doing it in the first place. I put in a day or two of effort to get rid of failing grades, so if they just go back to how things were before they're just wasting my time."

Rather than being abusive, Yukimura seemed to be muttering his honest thoughts.

"Then, why did you decide to teach us this time?"

It's difficult to compare the cramming that Yukimura taught to the final exams. If you don't study thoroughly, you shouldn't expect to overcome the difficulty. Yukimura is under a lot of pressure. In the event that Hasebe and Miyake get expelled, he would probably choose to shoulder the responsibility himself. If it got to that point, he would look past the fact that it was their own responsibility and start to regret that he could have taught them better. That's the type of person that Yukimura is.

"I was useless during the sports festival. What I had determined to be unnecessary had caught up with me. The only difference here is whether the

school prioritizes athletics or academics.”

Ike, Yamauchi, Sudō, and other students who wouldn't study. Yukimura who wouldn't exercise. Despite their differences, since he had judged that the school determines these things to be of equal importance, he had come to this conclusion.

“In this school, it's not enough to just study. It's not enough to just exercise. Even if we were to combine the two, it still wouldn't be enough. Even people like Horikita or Hirata, who are well-versed in both, can't survive this alone. Intuition, inspiration, and common sense. Ultimately, we will be called upon to display these indispensable qualities of human society. There's no way we could do it purely on our own. It's necessary to unite as a team and stick together. That's the only way.”

Yukimura should have suffered all kinds of hardships to get into this school by now.

“So I decided to help. I want to contribute what I can to the class.”

And that, of course, would be holding a study group.

“It's also because I had noticed that I had these selfish feelings about studying. I was reminded of my selfish mother when I thought of this, so I re-examined myself..... No, this story is unnecessary. You can forget it.”

Yukimura, who had returned from his thoughts, interrupted himself and took his gaze off the ceiling.

“Perhaps if I had to tutor Ike, I would have more problems. Miyake and Hasebe both have the ability to work hard and be serious about their schoolwork, so it’s much easier. Also, since they are good at science, this shouldn’t be too hard. I don’t know how much I’ll be able to help, but I can expect them to at least have some sizable improvements.”

What forward-thinking..... No, would it be better to take this as his response to the two of them? Even though he was just listening silently, he could see that Miyake and Hasebe both had a good attitude toward reading. They both had a pretty good viewpoint and ability to understand the material. Because of this, Yukimura earnestly wanted to do his best for them.

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

Hasebe and Miyake also hadn’t returned yet.

It seemed like there would be some time before the start of the study session, so I gave this excuse to leave the table as well. This was because I had been feeling the gazes of not only Ishizaki, but also of somebody else.

Although I couldn’t see it clearly, someone had been discretely trying to peek over here. Yukimura didn’t look at me as I left at all, so I moved directly to their seat. I don’t think that they had noticed me, so I walked up directly while hiding my presence.

“What are you doing all on your own, Sakura?”

“Hyaa!?”

Sakura jumped a little in her seat and looked up fearfully.

“Uh... A coincidence, really, Ayanokōji-kun!”

“Oh, so it’s a coincidence?”

“A coincidence, yes!”

“Haven’t you been looking back at us from time to time?”

“That was... that..... I-I’m sorry...”

Since Sakura didn’t have the confidence to carry out the lie from the beginning, she immediately confessed.

“It doesn't seem like you necessarily have anything to tell me, or do you?”

So there was no need for her to come here. If it was urgent, she would have called or sent an email.

She didn't have any errands or business here, and she’s not the type who would ask someone else, so looking at it this way...

“Do you want to join the study group too?”

“Wha, why, w-why!?”

“Well, the reason is rather simple. I can see your study materials inside your bag.”

It's not necessary to take all of your notebooks with you whenever you go somewhere, but a study group would be a different story.

There are a lot of students here who were studying on their own, but Sakura would never choose to study in a place like this.

“Oh no.....”

She panicked a bit and attempted to close her bag, but it was too late. That reaction itself was just like saying yes.

“If you don't mind our study group, would you like to join us? I'll ask the others.”

“B-but I... I've hardly ever spoken to any of them...”

Sakura couldn't get close to our table because she wasn't good at coming in contact with other people. I understood this much even though she didn't say it.

“You've come this far on your own? If it's the Sakura that I know, you wouldn't have even been able to take the chance to come to Pallet and risked the chance of meeting people.”

It's no easy task to lurk alone in a place that is filled with both large and small groups of people. The idea of escaping and heading back should have crossed her mind several times already.

Despite that, she still managed to remain here, which shows Sakura's current state of mind.

"It's up to you to decide what to do. It's better not to consider just my opinion on this. You have to consider how Yukimura, Hasebe, and Miyake would think and feel about it as well."

Sakura may be discouraged by these words.

She might resent me and think: 'He doesn't want to take a stance on it and accept me.'

However, Sakura's passive attitude has its good parts and bad parts.

Since it's a matter of her progress as a person, keeping my distance and waiting to see what she chooses to do on her own is the best policy.

Of course, I have a reason to think this.

Despite being in a group now, the threshold for communication with Yukimura and the others seems to be lower than with the other classmates. I feel like that in my own way. Sakura must also have a similar feeling.

"Just think about what you want to do. We'll be staying here for the next hour

and studying.”

Although it seems a little cold, I left Sakura after saying only those words. Even though the cafe was crowded, if I was to spend too much time next to Sakura’s seat, I would soon be spotted by Hasebe.

I casually returned to my seat. Yukimura only glanced at me and said nothing in particular.

After waiting for about 2 minutes, we were approached by the others.

“What a long wait. So, have you finished going over everything yet?”

“I’m almost done.”

Yukimura sped up his pace.

“Oh yeah! That’s right Ayanokōji-kun, I wanted to ask you something. Okay?”

“Stop it, Hasebe.”

Miyake stops Hasebe from trying to ask something.

“Oh come on. Like, it’s not a big deal if anyone else hears.”

“That’s not the issue. Consider the time and place, you know?”

“It’s after school, and this is the school cafe, so right now is really the perfect time to start on the subject, right?”

After Miyake saw that Hasebe had no intention of backing down, he shook his head as if to give in.

What on earth is she trying to ask me?

“Ayanokōji-kun, are you going out with Horikita-san?”

“I am not.”

“An immediate response? Should I say that answer sounds pretty rehearsed? To me, it seems pretty suspicious indeed.”

“I’ve already been asked by various people before. Horikita and I don’t always work together.”

“That may be true. But they say that rumors about love are only half false, you know.”

A girl like Hasebe who prefers to alone seems to also be seriously interested in the topic of romance.

A sensible guy in this situation wouldn’t forget to check with Hasebe to see if she has a boyfriend.

Of course, there's no way that I was going to do it (it simply isn't possible), so the topic ended with that.

"Okay!"

Yukimura suddenly raised his head in full force. It seemed that he had finally finished his revision.

"Somehow, I feel like I was able to grasp where exactly the two of you are having difficulties. This is the detailed plan I would like to focus on moving forward."

He announces this and passes over the various notes he had written to Miyake.

"I tried to come up with some liberal arts questions. I'll also have Hasebe answer them too, so don't answer them directly in my notebook. Write them on your own. The time limit is ten minutes for all ten questions."

Miyake took out his notebook without any complaints about the impromptu questions. Since he understood that this was in order for him to produce the best results he obeyed the instructions. After ten minutes of struggling, he passed the questions over to Hasebe like a baton. The purpose of these questions was to conduct a more in-depth investigation of their weaknesses.

Then, after a total of 20 minutes of exams, Yukimura immediately began writing out their scores on his notebook.

“Honestly, you guys.....”

Yukimura finished grading the impromptu exams, and with a dumbfounded sigh, presented them with their scores.

They mutually got three answers correct, six incorrect, and the last one was half correct.

Their exams were the same, but it was surprising that they managed to get the exact same questions right and wrong.

“You’re not only good at the same subjects, but you each have the same tendency of memorizing information.”

“Awesome! Doesn’t it feel almost like our destinies are intertwined, Miyatchi?”

“I don’t feel it.”

“Ah, as always your responses are dull. But, isn’t this kinda a problem?”

Hasebe returned to her senses and began to feel anxious, but in fact, the opposite was true.

“It would be better to say that this situation is perfectly fine. It will only take half as much effort to solve.”

If their learning ability and tendencies are almost exactly the same, as Yukimura says, the burden should become rather light.

The number of people who need to be taught can essentially be considered to be just one person.

Of course, because they are so similar, there should also be a couple of trivial differences, but when those situations come up, as long as they follow their instructions, it should carry on smoothly.

“Do you feel like this will be easy?”

“It depends on how much effort you put in from now on. These questions were some of the less difficult ones, but your grades were still a bit disturbing. I think it’s necessary for us to gather like this a bit regularly... In short, we will need to study more. Counting backward from the day of the final exam, I’d like to have seven or eight opportunities to gather. A certain amount of time between each meeting will be preferable so you can do a bit of self-studying as well. Are you three alright with this? Miyake should also have problems with club activities.”

“As we get closer to the final exam, the number of club activities will cool down a bit, but let me ask to be sure.”

Yukimura nodded to this natural request. Then there was Hasebe.

“Ah, let me know one thing before I answer you, okay? Is this kinda what it will be like to study normally? I don’t like, like studying, but when it comes to reviewing this and that, I think I can still do it on my own. Is there any benefit to

studying in a group like this? Yeah, I know that having a smart person teach me will increase the efficiency, and I came here because of Miyatchi's advice, but I'm still kinda dubious about it all."

"You don't seem to be dubious about only my teachings."

Yukimura noticed the overtone of Hasebe's response, which explained the policy.

"I'm not going to be holding a regular study group. This is because while the questions for past exams were written by the school, this time around they're going to be written by other classes. The school's problems are usually targeted at assisting to move on to university and are standardized to content that is either basic or relatively easy to study for. To put it simply, it's a matter of course. On the other hand, the fact that questions will be written by other students is an unknown. It's difficult to formulate tendencies and countermeasures for it. This is why after considering this, it's necessary to study for these exams."

Miyake was convinced with Yukimura's explanation.

"That's right. Class C is definitely going to give us very tricky questions."

"Ah, well, it's not entirely impossible to formulate tendencies and countermeasures. It might seem unthinkable to come up with the problems Class C will have for us, but what if we think of the individual who will come up with them? As far as I can predict, I think the question-writer will be 'Kaneda'."

Although I'm not completely familiar with the name, it's not one I've never

heard before.

“He’s that disgusting creepy-looking guy with the glasses, right?”

“I’m not too sure if I agree with that, but that’s probably the guy. He’s the best student in Class C.”

If the Yukimura’s information is correct, it would be appropriate to assume that the students who have done well in their studies would be the ones writing their questions.

“Ah, but if the problem’s turn out to be really distorted, it may also be one that was written by Ryūen or Ishizaki, right?”

“That’s impossible. Even if there is a trap question, it’s impossible to come up with one without first having a firm background in the subject. Try to imagine it yourself. Do you think you can come up with a social studies question that can’t be solved easily?”

“.....No, not at all. I can’t even think of a topic in the first place.”

“Same thing here. What kind of social studies questions will be put on the test?”

“That’s the way it is. Even if you think about it, your mind will only flash over the obvious content. Difficult problems and trap questions aren’t something you’d be able to easily create even if you wanted to. If you look at the textbook and aim for the difficult parts of the content, the school will probably end up rejecting the question since the problem wasn’t set up correctly.”

His conjecture made a good point. However, it was just a little too weak to instill confidence.

“Is it up to the school to ultimately decide if a question is acceptable or not?”

I gave a slight interjection into Yukimura’s story.

“If so, do we need to know the clear standard which the school determines a question to be acceptable?”

“That’s true. If we knew that, we wouldn’t have to work as hard.”

“I think it’s possible to figure out. In short, if Class D prepares a number of highly selective questions, and gives them to the school for review, would it not be possible to come to a clear answer to the question based off which questions get accepted?”

“Ah, that’s right. That’s actually a really good idea.”

“You’re pretty sharp, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“In this case, we seem to have to submit these questions as early as possible in order to identify the benchmarks that the school has. I’ll try to think about a few questions myself, but will Horikita or Hirata be willing to help as well?”

“I don’t know... we’re totally split up from them now, so the details are unclear.”

“That’s troubling. You’re the only one of us who can keep in touch with them.”

Miyake and Hasebe also nod almost simultaneously.

“I get it. I’ll see what I can do... but don’t expect too much from me.”

Do both Horikita and Yukimura plan to use me as a convenient middleman for them?

“Yeah, I see.”

Hasebe’s doubts seemed to have been settled, and there was a smile on her face.

“Well, I don’t do any club activities, so let’s decide how to do this based on what works for Miyatchi, okay?”

By saying so, she gave up all the decision-making rights.

When Miyake heard this, he looked at Hasebe in surprise.

“I thought Hasebe was still going to refuse. How unusual, you don’t usually want to get involved with guys.”

“It seems like it would be kinda bad if I didn’t join in the study group. It would

be my own fault if I was going to like, drop out of school, but I don't want to get Miyatchi involved, alright?"

She appeared to have agreed for the sake of her friend Miyake instead of for her own.

"Well, that should be it for today. I plan to hold the first study session the day after tomorrow."

Yukimura summed up the first session. Did he plan on going over the topic trends and formulate countermeasures today and tomorrow?

After that, even as we announced that we were finished and left Pallet, Sakura still didn't come over to talk to us.

(Part 4 End)

(Part 5)

"This is very useful information. We definitely want to attempt to see what type of questions the school will be accepting."

After I had separated from the rest of the group and gotten back to my dorm

room, I immediately contacted Horikita.

The goal was to convey Yukimura's information to Horikita and ask for further instructions moving forward.

"Hirata and I are already working on questions for Class C, but I do want to know how far we can go with trap questions. I'll share the information with you. It's great that everything seems to be going well, but can we be confident that Kaneda-kun will be creating the problems for Class C?"

"There is absolutely no guarantee. But considering the questions that Kaneda might come up with is only one way to tackle the questions during the study sessions. There shouldn't be any harm in doing that, right?"

"That's true. If this exam is full of difficult problems, even we might have to try our best to get 80 or 90 points."

If it ends up being more difficult than a test given by the school, then there will be a limit to how high we can score on it.

"By the way, how did the study group go today? If you don't mind, can you tell me about it?"

It wasn't something I needed to hide, so I told the truth about what happened today. However, I did exaggerate to her a little. I made it clear to her that I had made friends. Horikita listened and didn't touch upon that aspect at all.

The only thing she made notice of was that there were many similarities between the academic abilities of Miyake and Hasebe.

“They don’t appear to be doing it on purpose, but it’s still quite the coincidence.”

“Right?”

It’s not unusual for two people to have occasional overlaps, but for it to be this similar is very strange.

“I will keep my eye on them as much as possible, they seem easy enough to control anyways.”

“Please do. In addition, there’s another thing I’d like to ask of you. When Yukimura-kun’s study group is taking a day off, would you please come to my study group to keep tabs on everyone?”

“This isn’t what we had originally agreed upon, is it?”

“It’s not any different. You don’t need to teach, I just want you there for management.”

The word management is vague. It’s so vague that I have absolutely no idea what she means by it. To me, it’s as confusing as the meaning of the term ‘less than a lover, but more than a friend’.

“.....What kind of management?”

I asked, which she responded to with a deliberate sigh.

“The problem is that compared to how many teachers there are, there are too many people to tutor. In any case, I can’t supervise everyone. I’d like you to monitor whether or not everyone is studying well.”

“The school teachers manage to teach dozens of students all by themselves. Don’t be naive.”

“It may be self-righteous, but teachers aren’t able to supervise everyone on their own, so students end up falling behind like Ike-kun. Even if the classrooms are equipped with surveillance cameras like they are here, the situation stays the same. In class, their attitude is faked successfully, but in the end, they’re not focusing on their studies, so we’re being forced into a desperate situation like the one we’re in now.

I had thought that I had given her a daring and resolute response, but in a single breath, she had managed to strike back and crumble my argument.

“Yukimura-kun is struggling because he isn’t used to teaching, but I’m having difficulties due to the sheer number of students on my end. Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun are particularly problematic since they’re less attentive than kindergarteners are.”

Ike and Yamauchi appear to be attending the study sessions, but also seem to be doing whatever they wanted to do during them.

“Do you have any objections?”

“None.”

“Good.”

“I can skip the night sessions, right?”

“That’s fine. The night session is much better than the day one. Though compared to the boys I’m dealing with, some of the girls are the issues in that group.”

I see. Was the situation that the girls who hadn’t planned on participating, chose to do so to be with Hirata? Even if Karuizawa was his girlfriend, it wouldn’t be bad to interact with such a handsome guy, and it might not be a bad thing for the ikemen under Karuizawa’s control to rise in popularity.

I didn’t actually take part in it, but the interesting scene of their study group comes to mind.

Come to think of it, Sudō’s name hadn’t come up as one of her complaints.

“Has Sudō been behaving himself?”

“Yes, he’s working seriously. Although his level hasn’t quite reached a middle school student’s yet.”

Study content aside, he seems to have been putting in the effort to improve his attitude.

“Please take care of me starting tomorrow.”

At the very least, I definitely don't have a good feeling about this.

"By the way, other than the matter with the study group, I want to make sure of something else. How's Kushida?"

"What do you mean?"

"Has nothing particularly changed with her?"

"Certainly. I think she will be able to help out to the best of her abilities. She has also promised to attend the study sessions every day."

That's not what I wanted to ask about, but from Horikita's point of view, she doesn't seem to have anything in particular to say on the topic. After all, it was only the first day of the study sessions, so she shouldn't have had an opportunity to get to the bottom of it. But from my point of view, it's also true that I can't sit back and simply watch the issue.

"Have you already started creating the questions for Class C?"

"Of course. As a basic guideline, I plan on incorporating the opinions of Hirata-kun and Yukimura-kun to create the questions. I originally wanted to ask more people for help, but the more people we have working on them, the higher the risk there will be that someone will leak them to Class C, so this is a very troubling situation for me."

Right, the questions and their accompanying solutions are the key points to

Class D's defense. Even if we try to plan out an attack, if our defense is defeated, we wouldn't be able to survive. Our test problems cannot afford to be leaked by any means. It's also possible that we might come into contact with someone who is looking to explore the information.

"Even so, it will be hard to definitively get rid of outsiders given Kushida's character and her actions so far. Aren't you unable to attend the evening sessions? It would be hard for you to have a meeting with Hirata about it."

"Well, I can't really deny that, but she can't act carelessly herself either. I think that as long as we avoid asking for her help with the questions, she won't end up doing anything out of line."

This was only mutual speculation. The actions Kushida would take moving forward are something that neither of us can predict.

"These questions and answers are the lifeline of Class D. Don't forget that if these leak out, Class D will be sure to lose."

This is something I'll have to consider separately from the desire to pull Kushida over to our side.

The present state of affairs wouldn't allow for us to leave an eyesore unattended.

"I'll avoid making any information public, but that's probably not enough to solve the issue."

"I'm not worried about the process of making the questions, it's what comes

after when we make the proposals to the school. As long as the questions and answers are confirmed with Chabashira-sensei the day before the final exam, the enemy will find out what they are.”

During the sports festival, Kushida had used a technique like this in order to look at the participation table.

It’s more than likely that Ryūen will come to request this of Kushida again.

“That is to say, there is no way out of this other than by talking with her.”

“Even then, what are you going to do if the information leaks out to Class C?”

“That situation... I don’t want to think about it.”

“You can’t afford not to think about it. This involves the entirety of Class D. No matter how much we study and improve our scores, if they get nearly 100 points across the board, we have no chance of winning.”

If our answers are completely memorized by the opponent, we lose.

“Yes, I understand that you’re anxious, but I also have some countermeasures that I’ve been thinking about on my own. Now that it’s past 10 o’clock, I’d like to come up with at least one more question before I go to bed. So can I hang up now?”

I agreed with her and ended the call. I found that the battery was low, so I plugged it into a charger attached to a socket on my bed.

The current issue is similar to the one we faced during the sports festival. This is because the questions that we make act as the lifeline of our class for the final exams just as the participation table did during the festival. Ryūen and Kushida aren't going to be using the same strategy as one another. They will certainly think of separate strategies.

Horikita said she would think about countermeasures, but I don't know to what extent they will be.

She should try to convince Kushida head on.

I'm not trying to laugh at Horikita's strategies at all. It's more like there's not much else that can be said about it.

It's just hypothetical, but if I'm going to win Kushida over to my side, I should be using the kind of threatening behavior that I did with Karuizawa. No, I'd would have to do more than that to bring Kushida to her knees. However, I still don't know the details of Kushida's past, so that's not an option for me in this situation. Plus, there's no guarantee that I can successfully threaten her since the way we each go about things is so different. They might seem similar, but they aren't really the same.

".....What am I going to do?"

Unfortunately, I can't think of any other means right now.

After I had turned off my phone and rested for while, an email arrived. It was a message from Ryūen.

After the sports festival, I had asked Class C's Manabe for Ryūen's email address, and sent him the audio file. I hadn't gotten a response from Ryūen until now.

[Who are you?]

This sentence was the only thing that was written.

"Another meaningless email..."

I'm a nice enough person to give Ryūen a response. I'm using a free address that wasn't able to be traced. He should be able to understand such a thing, and was probably the game that Ryūen was playing.

I decided to ignore the email and go to bed.

(Part 5 End)

(Part 6)

It was pretty lively with a lot of students at the library after school even though it was still pretty early.

Although it was crowded, it wasn't as though all of the students were noisily immersed in chatter.

Usually, nearly half of the seats wouldn't be filled with students, but right now it was only about 10%. Of course, most of the students weren't reading or chatting with their friends, but instead were immersed in studying for the final exams.

"Huh, so this is what the library has become?"

A student beside me muttered out of interest.

Yes, I had a little problem next to me.

It seems that Satō had decided to attend the study session, so she ended up coming with me to the library.

I hadn't been in contact with Satō after we had exchanged contact information the other day, so this was very awkward.

"This is my first time in the library. How about you Ayanokōji-kun?"

".....I've been here several times."

“I see. You’re surprisingly studious.”

“It’s more like I’m killing time instead of studying.”

“So in order to kill time, you come to the library? That’s strange.”

I gave a tentative answer, but I felt like my attitude had become somewhat absent-minded.

This was because I didn’t know at all what type of mood Satō would have in mind. However, Satō is also a girl. She wouldn’t miss the subtleties of these feelings either.

“Err... Ayanokōji-kun... am I bothering you?”

“What do you mean, Satō?”

“Hah, well, I did suddenly say that I was going to attend the study session.”

“I’m not particularly bothered. Horikita and Kushida who are teaching today also shouldn’t be. Honestly, I’d expect them to be happy right?”

Having someone from your class get expelled isn’t exactly a thing anyone would be happy about, and there’s also not any benefits to it. I attempted to somehow shift the topic of discussion with this point.

“It’s not like that.....”

Of course, that's not the answer that Satō was hoping for. She became a little depressed.

However, the location of the library was a bit troublesome. I whispered to avoid disturbing other students, ultimately making the distance between me and Satō unexpectedly close. I could just barely feel Satō's breathing.

Perhaps this can be classified as one of the precious scenes of youth? If so, youth may be an unexpectedly harsh thing since this situation is not a happy one for me at all. I feel unnecessarily nervous, and can't help but worry about Satō. I'm speculating on her feelings and choosing my words carefully to respond to her emotions.

The single thing that I desire the most right now is to go back home soon.

No, is that really the case?

I calmed down a little and began to rethink the situation.

I'm at a loss when it comes to things that I haven't experienced before. It's too abstract a feeling to be classified as "in love" and there isn't a clear answer for it. From my perspective of living in a world of zero or one in the past, it's only natural for my immediate reaction to be rejection.

But didn't I come to this school looking for something other than zero or one?

"Everyone is so serious, using the library and everything."

“It’s pretty routine to hold study sessions here.”

By chance, Horikita heard what Satō said and responded on her own.

I regained my composure and put these thoughts out of my mind. For now, let’s concentrate on overcoming this study session safely.

Horikita, who had visited the library yesterday, didn’t seem surprised at its current state of things.

“You two, spare me from the commotion like the one you made yesterday. Today you might not just get away with a warning; there’s a chance that you’ll be kicked out of the library.”

“I know, I know.”

Horikita found a vacant seat while admonishing the two problem children, Ike and Yamauchi. Although more than half of the seats are empty, that doesn’t mean you can sit anywhere you’d like.

It seems to be a common phenomenon in every school, where the space available to the upperclassmen is separate from the underclassmen. It had become an unspoken rule that the seats next to the windows with the nice view, and the seats in the cafe near the free drinks were priority seats for the senior students.

In this kind of territorial division, the section that the first years were allowed

to use was the noisy place close to the entrance. However, this time there is something else to look out for.

If possible, we want to avoid being in the vicinity of any Class C students.

“Horikita, what are you going to do?”

“If that’s what you’re worried about Ayanokōji, you don’t have to worry about it. I’ve already taken countermeasures for that.”

Someone in our line of sight moved in the area used by first years. A student who spots Horikita stands up and waves at us, beckoning us over.

She was a first-year student from Class B, Ichinose Honami. A total of eight Class B students were with her.

It seemed like there were four guys and four girls, so if you add Ichinose there were nine in total.

Based on Horikita’s expression, this didn’t seem to be accidental. She came over as if to introduce herself.

“Have we made you wait?”

“Oh no, not at all. We just got here ourselves. Right everyone?”

“Yesterday, I met up with Ichinose-san here in the library and suggested a

joint study group. Since we aren't competing with Class B in this exam, I think that we can help each other out a bit."

On her own accord, Horikita made a proposal that involves a lot of people. This is what she wanted to show me yesterday.

Lights are usually followed by shadows. Ike and the others had managed to settle down before they had arrived at the library, only to have their spirits soar in a strange direction.

"Ike-kun, didn't I just warn you?"

Horikita grabbed Ike by the arm as hard as she could. He was scared just like a frog being watched by a snake.

Was this the reason why Ike had become so excited about the study session? If you're going to study together with the girls from Class B, it's understandable that he would be overjoyed about it.

"Ah! Ayanokōji-kun also came today?"

"That's because I'm close to getting a failing mark. You might have to take care of me for a while."

"That's right."

The library is a quiet place, but it's not like we're unable to have a conversation. Of course, it's still necessary to speak in a low voice. Since

Ichinose had managed to secure good seats in the corner of the room, our conversation also wasn't very noticeable. In addition, the music flowing through the room wonderfully masked our voices from others. It was Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, 'Pastoral'.

I don't know who picked the song, but it's a relaxing and pretty good choice.

However, Horikita had actually thought to create a joint study group. The final exams are likely to be more efficient if it's based on the premise of actually working with each other. For example, by exchanging information between classes, a large number of people will have a relatively larger number of viewpoints to consider for writing the test questions.

But at the same time, we will also be facing some risks. If there are students in Class B who are close with someone in Class C, the information might leak out. Of course, Horikita already understands this point, but she had chosen to unite together because of the positives that it would bring.

The students from each class freely fill up the empty seats.

"Let's sit here, Ayanokōji-kun."

"Ah, alright."

Satō beckoned for me to come over, and just as she requested, I sat down in the seat next to her.

"Ooh, Satō. You've been around Ayanokōji a lot today."

“Naturally. We are a pair, after all.”

To avoid looking inept in front of Ichinose, I took out my textbooks and notes after I got to my seat. Even if it’s just a formality, I will have to study.

“Hey, Ayanokōji-kun. I wonder how I should study?”

“.....Ask Horikita questions like that.”

“Is this not a good opportunity? You’re a pair, so why not take care of teaching Satō-san?”

Horikita doesn’t understand other people’s feelings and said such an irresponsible thing.

“There was only a slight difference between my test scores and Satō’s, so there’s probably nothing I can teach. I want to receive some instruction myself.”

Because Ichinose was right in front of me, I quickly responded, but it might have failed.

“Is that so? I get it. In this case, I’ll teach you how to study well.”

She responded in such a way as if to draw out my commitment.

“Let’s work hard together, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Ah, okay.....”

The really troubling study group seems to be about to begin.

This hunch almost came true.

“Ayanokōji-kun you’re always so calm, and you kinda give off this feeling of maturity. What were you like back in middle school?”

Satō suddenly turned and leaned forward, then looked up into my eyes and asked me. Her uniform was undone a little bit at her chest, and for a moment, her valley of cleavage catches my eye. I felt like her breathing did seem to be a little intense, so I wonder if Satō noticed this.

“It was pretty normal. Nothing particularly eye-catching or inconspicuous, and not really all that different than now. Maybe it’s the reason why I’m so gloomy?”

I tried to distance myself from Satō by passing off my past as something boring.

No, it’s not that Satō can’t have a crush on me, but instead that there were several uncomfortable pairs of eyes that are looking at the two of us.

In particular, Ike and Yamauchi were giving me a blatantly skeptical look.

“Ayanokōji-kun isn’t gloomy. Ah, should I say that you feel pretty cool or

collected?”

“I don’t think cool relates to me very well.”

“Really? I don’t know about anyone else, but I think it describes you well.”

It seems that no matter what I say, Satō will interpret it to be interesting and positive.

In which case, I’ll have to get out of this situation with the standard response.

“.....Well, let’s start by asking what your weaknesses are. Do you have your old midterm exams with you?”

“I do.”

She took crumpled test papers out of her bag and spread it out. Her scores for each subject hovered around 50 points. It was outside of the failing range, but her answers were rather rough. Her simple questions were answered correctly, but the ones of higher difficulty were devastating.

It’s incredible that Satō has managed to overcome all of the exams so far without studying.

“How is it? Is it that bad?”

“Yeah..... We will need to study together since I have about the same.....”

“Yes!”

Satō nodded in high spirits, but I wish she could have used a quieter voice.

“Aren’t you two being too intimate with one another?”

Ike said this while watching our conversation from afar, and then cast us a suspicious look.

“We’re paired together, so it’s a given that we work with each other, right?”

In the face of his suspicions, Satō defended the test with a dignified response.

“Prepare for yourself instead of commenting on things you don’t understand.”

Horikita didn’t care about who got along with whom, and immediately proceeded to rebuke Ike.

“Tsk, I know that.”

Ike seemed very dissatisfied, but he hastily began to prepare to study.

This was really the fruit of education..... He’s been tamed very well.

(Part 6 End)

(Part 7)

The study session wrapped up with any issues, and all of the students began to prepare to go home.

“Ah, I’m too tired to stand!”

For Ike who couldn’t even maintain focus in regular classes, after school studying sessions are simply hell.

We weren’t under the supervision of the teachers, yet there was no free time so it was difficult to endure.

Ike had a radiant expression, but Horikita’s eyes were cold to the sight of it.

“It’s not over with just today. Don’t forget that there is another study session tomorrow.”

“I, I get it. Isn’t it okay for me to be just a little bit happy? I’ve worked hard!”

As fast as rabbits, Ike and the others left the library.

“Class D seems so lively, so much so that I almost want you to share some of that with us.”

“It’s worse than you think, but I understand what you mean. I envy the stability of Class B.”

Although both Ichinose and Horikita were desiring the things they didn’t have, the environment of Class B was truly enviable.

The students participating in the study group had a higher level of capability than the ones in Class D, and they were all also very focused.

Above all, they were quiet, calm, and their intention to work together as a class was a strong one.

“Then, goodbye. Horikita-san as well, Goodbye.”

Kushida also left the library with a bunch of other girls.

“Yeah, goodbye.”

She did these short exchanges and left without incident. At the moment, there wasn’t anything conspicuous about Kushida’s approach. It felt like they were investigating and testing one another.

“Ichinose-san, can I ask you a few questions?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“I’d like for it to just be between you and me if possible. It should only take a few minutes.”

Horikita set her sights on the Class B students who were looking to return with Ichinose.

“A few minutes, huh? Alright, I’m sorry everybody, could you all wait in the hallway?”

“Yeah okay. We can chat while we wait.”

The students from Class B seemed willing to accept it. Ichinose then agreed to stay behind.

All of the students in Class B and Class D finished up their work and left.

“Should I stay?”

“It’s the same whether you’re here or not, so do whatever you want.”

For a moment, I thought she was being sarcastic, but she probably made it easier for me to stick around by saying so.

“So what’s the story?”

It feels strange for two people to be alone like this despite the fact that I was also present.

Ichinose and Horikita, two people with contrasting personalities lined up shoulder to shoulder.

“Perhaps this goes without saying. Ichinose-san, you would help your friends if they’re in trouble, right?”

“Uhhh? Isn’t it natural to want to help if a friend is in trouble?”

“Yeah. Class B is now helping out with the study sessions. However, even if you want to help, there are all sorts of situations where it can be a handful. Situations like helping to improve academic ability, stop bullying, solve money problems, or fixing relationships between friends or teachers. People can be in many different types of trouble. Despite all of this, if a troubled friend were to still ask for your help, would you still reach out to them?”

“Of course I would. I would do everything I can.”

Although the question was difficult, Ichinose answered it immediately. There wasn’t a single ounce of doubt in her eyes.

“Well then, is there a clear criterion as to whether you consider someone to be a friend or not?”

Horikita was unable to find the answer due to her confrontation with Kushida.

Perhaps she was seeking relief by asking Ichinose these questions.

“Hmm..... I’m a little confused. What do you mean by that?”

“For example: As long as they’re a student from Class B, would you unconditionally be willing to help them? Even if it’s a student that you don’t normally interact with very much?”

“No matter what I think of the other person, I am a companion to the entirety of Class B. I will definitely help them if they are in trouble.”

“I guess that might have been a foolish question.”

In the face of Ichinose’s unhesitatingly quick answer, Horikita sighed at the stupidity of her own question.

“Let me foolishly ask you another question. Let’s suppose that there is someone in Class B who hates you, it follows that you would usually have a bad relationship with them. Would you be able to like that person? Or would you end up hating each other?”

“I don’t know... That might be a little difficult. If the other side was really physically disgusted by me, I probably wouldn’t be able to do anything about it on my own, so my only option would be to avoid contact with them to prevent irritating them further.”

“So, if such a person was in trouble..... What would you do then?”

“I would help them. Absolutely.”

Ichinose answered this last question immediately.

“Even if they’re physically disgusted by me, that would be my own problem. After all, I am a companion to the entirety of Class B.”

“Class B is really important to you.”

“Yup! Everyone in there is a good kid. At first, I was disappointed that I wasn’t in Class A, but now I feel like I’ve been placed into the best class. Do you feel differently about your own class, Horikita-san?”

“Well..... there is no place like home. Class D is surprisingly not that bad.”

“.....Oh...”

“What is it, Ayanokōji-kun? Do you disagree with something?”

I had been surprised by her praise of Class D. Horikita glared at me.

“Although it’s rude of me to insert in the middle of your conversation, may I also ask you something?”

“I’ll listen to anything you have to say.”

“I understand that Class B is an unconditional partner. Horikita and I are both vaguely aware of that idea. I even feel that making friends with people in our same situation is something that’s necessary. However, can you really say that people in Class A, Class C, or Class D are truly your friends?”

“To me, Ayanokōji-kun and Horikita-san are very important friends.”

“Then, what if we run into trouble and need help? What if we begged you to borrow one million points?”

“If there’s a good reason to, I would help you. The amount doesn’t matter, I would do everything I could.”

“Honestly..... you’re generous to a fault. At this rate, you'll end up trying to help everyone am I right?”

“Well, that would be ideal, but reality is not so naive. There’s a limit to the things that I can do on my own, and I think I understand this. Even if Ryūen-kun was to run into problems, I wouldn’t be able to help him like the others. Hmm..... But, well, as long as it’s no big deal, I’d still choose to help you.”

Let me add something. Most people can't normally handle those ‘big deals’ in the first place.

“That’s probably my answer. As long as I consider you to be a friend, the size of the situation isn’t an issue.”

“Although I appreciate it, I wonder if you can say something like that very easily. You’ll welcome me even if I cry and beg for your help, right?”

“I would definitely welcome you. I believe all the people who I consider to be friends also fall into my ‘partners’ category.”

When Horikita saw this level of goodness, she seemed to think she was being teased. She responded in contrast to her usual calm demeanor:

“So, what would you do if Kanzaki-kun and I ran into problems?”

“Choosing to help both sides..... isn’t allowed, right?”

“If I allowed you to do that, you’d definitely choose to help both sides.”

“Nyahaha, I give up.”

Being presented with a very unreasonable imaginary scenario, Ichinose is at a loss for what to do.

“Sorry, there’s probably no real answer. Based on what I understand from the information available, two friends are both in trouble with each other, and both have come to me looking for help. Whichever side I choose to help, I’ll both be staying true to my beliefs, while also lying about them.”

The answer that Ichinose had finally arrived at was very much her style.

When she heard this, Horikita was both genuinely surprised and impressed at the same time.

“I don’t believe in purely good people. I think most people are creatures that seek rewards for their actions.”

The ideals that Horikita stood for, what she upheld and believed in, made a noise and collapsed.

“But after hearing your words... I’m beginning to think that truly good people may be real.”

She spoke her honest thoughts, but for some reason, Ichinose wouldn't accept them.

No... Would it be better to say that to her, she couldn’t accept them?

“That’s..... That’s giving me too much credit, Horikita-san.”

Ichinose has been straightforward and honest this entire time, but this was the first time her eyes wandered. She got up from her seat and went to the library window.

“That’s not true. At least, you’re a better person than anyone that I’ve ever met. That’s what I think.”

“I’m not such an upstanding person.”

She seemed so shaken that she couldn’t even look Horikita in the face.

“Really, it’s not a very big deal...”

Horikita also noticed that Ichinose had responded strangely to the praise, and made amends to her.

“I’m sorry. All I had meant to say is that you’re a good person. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine. I don’t feel uncomfortable.”

She was obviously shaken.

Based on what we’ve previously seen of Ichinose, I thought that there was nothing that could dampen her spirits.

But perhaps I may have misunderstood that part of this.

“Is that all you wanted to talk about? I don’t want to keep Chihiro-chan and the others waiting, so I’m good to leave right?”

Ichinose stood in front of us as if looking to escape from the situation.

“Thank you for your willingness to answer my inexplicable questions.”

“No problem. Well then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After Ichinose had left the library, there weren't very many students left. There were a few third-year students, as well as some who were librarians.

"Let's go back. I still have work to do today."

"Although this just repeat confirmation, what are you going to do about Kushida? The way you're talking, it sounds like you have a plan."

Horikita probably doesn't like to be asked several times either, but I have to make sure.

"She's special. In any case, I'll have to make sure to be careful with my persuasion."

"Special?"

"I've been thinking about it a lot. About what kind of school life Kushida Kikyō would have if I hadn't chosen to come to this school. I knew the answer immediately. She would be just as trusted and depended on by everyone as she is now, and she would be able to do sports and study without a single flaw. She would have carried on that way all the way until graduation. I accidentally took that future away from her. Even now she's working with our enemy, Ryūen-kun, impatiently working to get me expelled. She didn't hesitate to participate in an act of hostility against her own class. Of course, none of this is my fault. It's just bad luck we ended up at the same school. But even so, for me, it's still not irrelevant."

This was why she's trying to convince Kushida.

Horikita feels more responsible now than I had expected.

No, is it that she's just trying to fulfill her obligations?

"I have some suggestions. May I have your attention?"

"What kind of suggestions?"

"I feel like I've found a piece of the puzzle for your reconciliation with Kushida."

"What do you mean?"

"Ichinose is a good person. Whether or not she is purely a good person is another matter, but wouldn't you agree that she is a good person in general?"

"Yes. To put it mildly, she is undoubtedly a good person."

"Why don't you borrow the power of a good person and ask her to mediate you two? Honestly, having a one on one conversation with her won't get you what you want. And if we ask someone from Class D, Kushida would never reveal her true nature."

"Wouldn't it be the same for Ichinose-san? No matter who it is, as long as they go to this school, the outcome would be the same."

"Well, is there any other student who would be able to mediate it?"

“That’s.....”

“If you had to choose anyone from the entire school, you would pick Ichinose, wouldn’t you?”

“I can’t deny it. But even so, I don’t think this is the right solution.”

“I didn’t say that this suggestion would solve everything. It’s just a piece of the puzzle, a fragment that helps lead to the solution. Right now, you two aren’t even able to open up discussion. If Ichinose were to mediate, the conversation would move forward.”

In fact, I think the existence of Ichinose is the starting point of getting to the solution.

All that remains is the difference in the way the pieces are used.

“You’ve really put me in the hot seat, but I’m not going to get involved in something like this. I’m going to go meet with other people right now, and then I’m going to take care of this issue with Kushida-san myself.”

In other words, she has no intentions of involving Ichinose?

(Part 7 End)

(Part 8)

After we got out into the hallway, an unexpected person was waiting. She waved and smiled, and ran over as soon as noticed us. Horikita wasn't surprised. Instead, she approached her and responded positively.

"Kushida-san, I've kept you waiting for a while."

"It's alright, there's still some time left until the appointed time. What were you talking about with Honami-chan just now?"

"Just a trifling topic."

"I'm interested. Or is it something you can't tell me about?"

Her tone and smile remained the same, but I could feel a heavy pressure that seemed to be directed at Horikita.

"Yeah, after all, it wasn't something unrelated to you. Let's talk."

Horikita began to naturally recount the conversation that she had with Ichinose, making slight changes where necessary.

"I asked her about what could be done to treat everyone equally."

“Really.....?”

“I’m not going to beat around the bush about who it was about. I had been referring to you, Kushida-san.”

“You see, Horikita-san. Maybe I can’t really get along with you, but I’d rather you not share such a story while Ayanokōji-kun is present.”

The true meaning of Kushida’s words was that she didn’t want Horikita to increase the number of people who knew her secret.

“Or... is it that Ayanokōji-kun and Ichinose-san now know something else?”

A sharp gaze pierces through Horikita. She accepts her gaze head-on.

“Or, I’m sorry Ayanokōji-kun, but could you please head home without me?”

“.....I guess I’m in the way. In which case, I’ll go back first.”

I left the two of them and went to the entrance. After changing my shoes, I began my trip back to the dorms. On the way, I was called by Horikita and picked up the phone.

“You and I came from the same middle school, and because I know your past, you want me to drop out of school. These are the facts, correct?”

Then, a muffled voice came through over the phone.

It seems that she had put her cell phone in her pocket and dialed me directly. It appears that Horikita was doing me special service by allowing me to listen in on their conversation directly.

“What short notice, why bring up the past so suddenly? I don’t like that topic.”

“I don’t want to look backward either. However, this is something we can’t avoid.”

“Let’s see, after all, we hardly ever have the chance to be alone. Yes, sure, I do hope you disappear from this school. This is indeed because of the fact that we came from the same school, and that you know about my past.”

“I’ve thought about it many times. I did hear about the incident, but it wasn’t interesting to me as I didn’t have any friends back then. All I ever heard were rumors, not the truth.”

“There’s no guarantee that you don’t know the facts, is there?”

“Yes. That’s the reason why this issue we have has yet to be buried. No matter how much I deny it, you won’t be able to ignore the possibility that I’m lying to you. Not only that, I don’t think you’d be comfortable with me knowing anything about the incident at all, and would choose to kick me out of school regardless.”

Kushida doesn’t deny it, so Horikita continues.

“Do you want to hold a bet with me, Kushida-san?”

“Bet? What does that mean?”

The other end of the cell phone went silent.

They seemed to stop their conversation and start thinking. Horikita offered to make a bet. This was not something she came up with on the spot, but something that she had thought of in advance.

“You don't like the fact that I exist. It's a helpless question, right?”

“Let's see, as long as Horikita-san is in this school, my mind will not change.”

“However, we are all students in Class D. If we don't help each other in the future, we won't be able to advance to Class A.”

“That depends on your way of thinking. I think that the problem will be solved as soon as you drop out of school.”

“Do you have any plans on dropping out yourself?”

“No way. If anyone is dropping out, it would be you, Horikita-san.”

While the quality was low and there were many choppy parts, the voices of both of them were calm.

“I’m not going to drop out of school either.”

“Then there’s no way. No matter what, I don’t think we’re going to get along.”

“Yeah... Maybe so. From that day until now, I’ve been thinking about it. Thinking about what to do to coexist.”

A solution doesn’t come to me either. Even now.

“Then I came to the conclusion that no matter how much I struggled, it was impossible.”

“I think so too, Horikita-san. It wouldn't be over unless someone didn't disappear.”

“But we’re not children. I’m not going to move forward just to pushed back again, but you still don’t trust me.”

Shrouded in a brief silence, Kushida then asked:

“Well then, what are you going to do? What did you mean by bet?”

“If I get a higher score than you on this upcoming final exam, I want you to cooperate with me in the future without being hostile. No, I won’t expect you to help me. However, I hope you won’t continue to interfere with me in the future. That’s it.”

“Does that mean you want to have a personal battle, regardless of the total points that your pair gets?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a bad bet, Horikita-san. I didn’t score higher than you during the midterms. Even if we did it based on total score, it would be even harder for me. Besides, I don’t think that there would be much in it for me if I won.”

“Yeah. It’s only natural that the odds would be relatively different. Therefore.....”

At this point, Horikita’s voice became very hard to hear.

“Let’s base it off of the eight subjects on the final exam instead of the total score. You are free to choose a subject that you’re good at. Then if your score is higher than mine, I will take the initiative to withdraw from the program.”

Horikita offered an unbelievable bet.

It would be hard to establish the bet if the two people had a dramatic difference in ability.

However, everything changes if the bet includes Horikita willingly deciding to drop out of school.

It also sets a good condition Kushida by letting her pick a subject that she

excels in.

If Kushida loses, there is no need to drop out, she only needs to stop attempting to have Horikita do so. While on the other hand, if Kushida wins, Horikita who has been in her way will drop out.

“This also might just be a mere verbal agreement. You could lose and then just treat the bet as though it had never happened. Of course, I also might not keep my end of the agreement. Can we really establish this bet based on just trust alone?”

“In order to avoid that kind of situation, I think I have prepared a reliable witness.”

“A reliable witness?”

“If you would please, nii-san.”

“Eh-!”

Kushida sounded really surprised when he showed up. So was I.

I heard Horikita’s brother’s words from over the cellphone.

In order to improve the credibility of her proposal, she actually enlisted such an unexpected guy as her witness.

“I’m terribly sorry, nii-san. I absolutely had to borrow your power, so I called you here.”

So, the witness turned out to be Horikita Manabu. He is both the former student council president and the elder brother of Horikita Suzune.

“Long time no see, Kushida.”

“.....Do you remember me?”

“I won't forget the people I've met.”

They were probably referring to their experiences from back in middle school. The Horikita siblings should have come from the same school. However, due to his graduation, he should be completely unaware of the situation surrounding Kushida.

“He is the person that I trust the most in this school. He should also be someone you can also trust to some extent as well. Of course, I didn’t tell my brother any of the details.”

“I was just called in as a simple witness. I’m not interested in the details.”

“Are you alright with this, Horikita-senpai? If your sister loses the bet-”

“My sister is the one who made the bet, so it’s not something I should weigh in on.”

“I also swear that I will not say anything to anybody in the case where I lose. My brother’s reputation would be hurt if it became widely known that his sister was the type of person who goes back on her promises. I would never behave in such a way.”

This is the best absolute margin for a deal.

“You’re serious, Horikita-san.”

“I am someone who cannot stop and wait forever.”

“Alright. I’ll play this game with you. The subject that we’ll compete over will be mathematics. The terms of the bet are just as Horikita-san had said earlier. If our scores end up tying, is it okay to invalidate the whole bet?”

Horikita assents to this, and the bet was confirmed in front of Horikita’s brother. There was no way to back out of this for either of them.

“I’ll do my duty as a witness. If one of you decides to break the agreement, you better be prepared.”

Even though he was now the dethroned student council president, Horikita’s brother’s authority should still be large.

At least under her brother graduates, Kushida would have to keep her end of the bargain.

“Thank you very much, nii-san.”

After this thank you, the phone temporarily became silent. It felt like they were waiting for Horikita's brother to leave.

"I'll be looking forward to the final exams, Horikita-san."

"Let's do our best for each other."

"Yeah. For Ayanokōji-kun as well."

".....Why are you bringing him up now?"

"Because I'm not stupid. You told him, didn't you? About my past."

"This is--"

"Ah, you don't have to answer that. Either way, I don't trust you, so it doesn't matter. I'm not going to break my side of the bet, so you can rest assured. Since Ayanokōji-kun has already seen a little of my bad side, it doesn't matter anyway."

After being sharply reprimanded, Horikita's anxiety and restlessness were transmitted to me over the phone.

"Even so, I still have to answer it. I did discuss your situation with Ayanokōji-kun."

“I know. For some reason or another, I knew this after looking at you. Moreover, are you also using your cell phone right now? I’ve tried calling you many times already, so it’s almost as though you’ve been in the middle of a call for this entire discussion.”

It wasn't just intuition, Kushida had both the proof and the conviction to go on the offensive.

“Can you come and join us at once, Ayanokōji-kun?”

The voice of Kushida came from afar.

Apparently, I’m being called for. It’s probably better to obediently respond to her.

(Part 8 End)

(Part 9)

I went down the stairs and joined up with Horikita and Kushida.

“Yoohoo-”

Although she looks like the usual Kushida, it's impossible to know the true feelings hidden beneath her expression.

"I'm at a loss, Kushida-san. Your insight and ability to act on it are amazing."

"Thank you, but don't think of me like that. I simply regularly observe a lot of people.

"Why did you call for Ayanokōji-kun? I thought that our conversation was already over. If you have any issues with the fact that I told him something, just say it to me."

"I have nothing to complain about. It's just that I thought I'd explain things to you face to face. I was wondering if I could add another condition to our bet."

"Condition?"

"If I beat your score, I also want Ayanokōji-kun to drop out."

Kushida really proposed it. I had been thinking about this possibility since the topic of betting first came up.

"It's impossible for me to agree with that idea."

"As far as I'm concerned, if there are people who know about my past, I would like to make them disappear all at once. Even if Horikita-san leaves the school, if Ayanokōji-kun stays, the seed of my troubles will also stay."

“Maybe so, but this is my personal bet, so I cannot afford to get Ayanokōji-kun involved. If one of the conditions is to add him, it’s a pity, but I won’t go through with this bet.”

Horikita seemed to have prepared an answer for this and withdrew her request before I could answer.

This is why she never told me about the bet. She wanted to avoid behaving in a way that would make me an accomplice.

“Well, that’s a pity. I could have killed two birds with one stone and saved myself the effort.”

“So, I’m also one of your targets for expulsion.”

Although I had already noticed this, It was still very disappointing.

“Ahahaha, you don’t have to be regretful. It’s not Ayanokōji-kun’s fault, it’s only unfortunate that you’ve learned of my true nature.”

“It’s not a problem as long as he doesn’t tell anyone, so doesn’t that get rid of the issue?”

“If that could solve the problem, you wouldn’t have made this bet, would you?”

“...As expected, you really are essential to Class D.”

Kushida is very observant of other people, so it's only natural that Horikita would recognize and desire such talent.

"You've changed, Horikita-san. You weren't the kind of person who would say that before."

"If I always have disputes with others, I won't be able to climb to the upper classes. It would be a vicious cycle that lasts forever."

Have they ever been this straight with each other before?

They're usually seriously hostile to each other, but this was the first time where they could understand each other. It's a pretty sad string of events.

If they hadn't come from the same middle school, Kushida definitely would have obediently helped Horikita. If that had happened, Kushida would be able to influence the students that Hirata and Karuizawa wouldn't be able to, and Class D likely would have been united earlier on in the year.

"The bet, I can take part in it, right? Of course, I'll bet that Horikita will win."

"Wait a second. What are you saying, Ayanokōji-kun? This is between the two of us; it has nothing to do with you."

"It's true that that's how it started out, but as a result of all this, I've gotten involved. There's also the fact that I was eavesdropping on your conversation, that's not irrelevant, right?"

Horikita seemed to want to avoid more responsibility, but I took the liberty of explaining that this was a good opportunity. Even if Horikita won the bet and was temporarily excluded from Kushida's attacks, there was no way to say for certain that Kushida wouldn't just turn around and focus her energy on me.

That being the case, it will be easier to figure everything out here and now.

"I'd be happy if you could do that."

"But I also have a condition if I'm going to become part of the bet."

"Hmm?"

"I want you to tell me the details of the 'Middle School Incident' that's compelling you to get the two of us expelled."

I pushed into a topic that Horikita would never enter.

"That's--"

I didn't hold back with Kushida. It doesn't matter even if she becomes upset.

I'm the victim of a bet. I can naturally keep my edge by claiming my rights.

"I have the right to ask for this. I don't know any of the details, but you're hostile to me and want me to be expelled from the school. You can understand that I can't accept that, right? You're acting on the premise that Horikita knows

the details of the incident, right? In that case, it wouldn't be any different for you to just explain it now. As long as you win the bet, both Horikita and I will drop out, and you don't have anything to worry about."

"I'm not interested in her past."

"Even if you're not interested, I am. I can't accept that my school life is being endangered on Kushida's whim."

I obstruct Horikita's statement, who was trying not to pry into her past.

"I can't deny the fact Ayanokōji-kun has become completely involved. If Horikita-san hadn't explained everything in detail, I would have expected for you to find this unreasonable. But, you won't be able to turn back if I tell you, you know?"

"Haven't I already come to a place where there's no turning back? Or are you willing to spare me if I say I don't know anything or haven't heard the details? Can you affirm that you won't regard me as an enemy?"

In her mind, Kushida has already marked me as an enemy. I have become a target of her treatment.

We don't have to wait for her to answer. Her reply is obvious.

"No way."

"In that case, tell me why it's worthwhile for me to bet on this."

Horikita probably doesn't understand why I'm doing this. She probably thinks that it doesn't matter, and I shouldn't join the bet and risk dropping out. She didn't say a word in front of Kushida, but her gaze did. I'm sorry, but I can't listen to your request, because I've got the rare opportunity to expose Kushida Kikyō's past.

"Ayanokōji-kun, is there anything that you're good at that you can't risk losing to anyone?"

"I'm only as capable as anyone else, a jack-of-all-trades but master of none. If I had to choose something I excel at, I guess I run a little fast."

"Then I wonder if you can understand. Don't you think that the best moment is when you feel the value of yourself that others can't have? It's like scoring the highest on a test or getting first place in a race, you get the limelight. Aren't there those moments where someone gives you a look that says: 'so powerful, so cool, so cute'?"

Of course I know that. People are creatures who desire to be praised. No one hates being praised or respected by friends or family, and working hard to be praised is a justifiable motive. This is commonly known as 'the desire for approval', which is a basic and indispensable part of human society.

"I think I'm probably more dependent on that kind of thing than the average person. I really want to show off. I can't help that I want to stand out; want to be praised. When these feelings are finally validated, I truly feel how valuable I am, and how wonderful it is to be me. But I know my limits. I know that no matter how hard I try, I can't be number one in schoolwork or sports. Being in second or third place can't possibly satisfy my desire, so I thought: 'Then I'll do

something that no one else can imitate'. I found that I can become number one as long as I'm more gentle and more intimate than anyone else."

So this is the source of Kushida's gentleness? However, If someone doesn't have two-faces, they give a better impression than someone who brags about being a good person. They're more honest than a liar who pretends to be a gentle person.

Of course, what Kushida does is not as simple as she's saying. Because even if you want to be gentle, you can't just get along with everyone.

"Thanks to this, I was able to become popular. Someone who's liked by both boys and girls. I was relied on, and I felt the pleasure of being trusted. Elementary and middle school were fun....."

"Isn't it painful to keep doing things you don't want to do? If it were me, I think my heart wouldn't be able to keep up, and end up breaking down."

It's understandable that she would ask this. Kushida has been constantly doing things that are often impossible to do.

"It's painful. Of course I'm suffering. Every day I accumulate so much stress that I feel like I'm going to go bald. I've pulled out my hair and vomited all because of the anxiety. But I can't let anyone see this side of me in order to maintain my 'gentle side'. So I've endured and endured and constantly endured. But my heart has reached its limit. It was impossible to let it continue accumulating."

I can speculate that Kushida's anxiety has been constantly under tremendous

pressure.

However, how has she been able to sustain this until now?

“My blog was where I supported my heart; it was the only place where I could confide about this pressure. Of course, It was all written anonymously, but it had all of the facts. I poured all of my usual stress out there, and I finally started to feel at ease. Thanks to my blog, I was able to sustain myself. I felt truly happy receiving words of encouragement from a third party who I didn’t even know... But one day, my blog was accidentally discovered by a classmate. Even though I had changed the names of the characters, it was impossible not to notice that the content was based on real events. It was inevitable that ended up hated for all of the bad-mouthing I had done to all of my classmates.”

“That’s how the incident started, right?”

“By the next day the content of the blog had spread to the whole class, and I was severely criticized by everyone. Up until that point, I had been a huge help to everyone, but as a result of this, everyone’s attitude toward me suddenly changed. It’s selfish, right? The boy who said he liked me hit me on the shoulder. It made sense, I had written on my blog that I was sick of his constant confessions and wanted him to die. A girl who I had comforted after she was dumped by her boyfriend kicked my desk because I had written about why she was dumped and made fun of her. To put it simply, I felt that I was in danger. More than thirty students had all marked me as their enemy.”

It was a battle that she could never win. I could only see Kushida being kicked out of the class.

“How did you get through that situation? By violence, or with lies?”

This was the mystery that Horikita and I had talked about before and couldn't come to a conclusion over.

"I didn't use 'lies' or 'violence'. I just preached the 'truth' and exposed the secrets of all of my classmates. Things like who someone hates, or who someone thinks is disgusting. I exposed the truths that I didn't even write on my blog."

We really didn't know. "Truth" is a weapon that can be acquired through the accumulation of trust. It's an option that doesn't exist for either Horikita or myself. Its strength feels small, but it's a powerful double-edged sword that can be used at the cost of losing trust.

"At this point, most of the hatred towards me was redirected towards others. The boys started fighting each other, the girls were pulling each other's hair and knocking each other over. The classroom was a mess. It was all truly amazing."



“This is the truth of the incident.....”

“The class became inoperable because of the disruption that I had caused. Of course, I was scolded by the school, but all I did was write anonymously on my blog. Besides, I was just telling the truth to my classmates, so the school was unsure of how to issue any punishment.”

She spoke quietly, but every word carried unspeakable weight.

“Now, unlike back in middle school, I don’t know much about the others in Class D. Despite this, I still have the ‘truth’ to make a few people fall apart. This is my only weapon right now.”

This was a threat. She means that if we tell anyone, we have to be aware of the consequences.

All she would need to do is use the truth, and she could cause a rift in Class D which had just begun to unite together. If this happened, the progressive atmosphere in the class would probably disappear.

“It was a mistake to use the Internet as an outlet to vent my own stress. So many unknown people will see what you write, and it will remain there forever. So I quit blogging. These days I manage my stress by spilling it out when I’m alone.”

She was talking about the other side of Kushida that I had seen before. It was that time when she had been spitting out insults.

“Do you want to remain as you are right now?”

“This is what makes my life worthwhile. I love being respected and noticed by everyone. When I’m told secrets that are only confessed to me, I feel something beyond my wildest imaginations.”

To know the anxiety, suffering, shame, or hope that others keep within their own hearts.

This was Kushida’s forbidden fruit.

“It’s a dull past, right? But for me, it’s everything.”

The smile on Kushida’s face disappeared. Having now revealed her past, we became her true enemies. From now on, she would pursue victory without the slightest bit of sympathy.

“Do not forget, if I win in mathematics, both Horikita-san and Ayanokōji-kun will voluntarily drop out.”

“Yes. I’ll keep my promise.”

Kushida seemed satisfied with this, so she left to go back to the dorms.

“Horikita, is it really alright to make this bet with Kushida? She was involved with Ryūen. In other words, depending on the negotiation situation, she can get the questions and answers directly from Class C.”

“If you knew that, why did you take part in the bet? Isn’t it because you believe I won’t lose?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t believe in her. I just had my own ideas before I took part in the bet.

“Although you said that she might get the answers from Ryūen-kun, will that really be the case? I don’t think I have to worry about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“As long as she gets the answers, Kushida’s victory is all but assured. That means that I’ll be guaranteed to drop out. However, do you think that Ryūen-kun will want for me to drop out?”

“.....It’s hard to say.”

He had tried to frame Horikita, but he didn’t try to get her to drop out of school. It’s hard to say, but it seems like he is pretty passionate about getting Horikita to admit defeat. He shouldn’t find this form of victory to be very ideal. Besides, he still doesn’t know the truth about me. Would he rule out the key figure working behind Horikita?

“But what if she lies to get the answers? She might say that she wants to raise her personal score and keep the bet hidden.”

“Ryūen-kun should be able to see through it. If Kushida wants the answers to

the math problems, logically, he'd look for a reason for it, right?"

"Well, sure."

But even so, there's no absolute guarantee. She might successfully deceive Ryūen.

Although I would like for her to consider it, it would be hard on Horikita to be that demanding.

"This is a dangerous bet with no absolute guarantee."

"That's always the case, no matter what kind of exam it is. It's easier if you sacrifice yourself."

For Horikita, it should have been unexpected for me to join in on the bet.

However, it seems that this is how Horikita had planned on dealing with Kushida.

She made it credible by bringing in the former student council president as a witness, and she promised to drop out of school on her own accord while promising not to tell anyone about her past.

"There's no way out from here. If you're going to do this bet, you absolutely have to win."

“It’s only natural.”

Thus, the battle where Horikita bet her future at the school begins.

Name	Akito Miyake (三宅 明人, Miyake Akito)	
Class	1st Year, Class D	
ID #	S01T004700	
Club	Archery Club	
Birthday	July 13th	
Academic Ability	D	
Intellect	D	
Judgement	C	
Physical Ability	B	
Teamwork	D-	

**Interviewer's Evaluation**

This student joined the archery club in middle school and participated in county-level competitions. In terms of academic skills, he has shown a tendency to overemphasize some subjects at the expense of others, but his attitude when he treats other people is extremely sincere and honest, worthy of praise. However, he's been given tutoring in the past due to the multiple instances of causing quarrels. He should improve his personal accomplishments as soon as possible.

Homeroom Teacher Records

The student has received a lot of praise from the Archery club and I can feel the enthusiasm he puts in the club activities. I am looking forward to seeing him pay more attention to his classwork.

Chapter 5: The Formation of Ayanokōji Group

(Introduction)

Days flew by until the time came when Yukimura started up the fifth study session.

We held the second, third, and fourth meetings at Pallet, but today we decided to meet up at a cafe inside of Keyaki mall. This was because as of today, club activities had stopped in order to allow students to focus on the final exams, so we expected for Pallet to be packed with people.

“Sure enough, it’s noisier than I expected.”

Yukimura was surprised by the number of students inside the cafe. We managed to secure our seats, but the cafe was nearly full. Study groups encompassing all grades were starting around us. Although there are many students who were working quietly, the sheer number of people made it seem like it wouldn’t be a quiet study session like it would be in the library.

“We should have done this in the library or my room.”

“No way. It’s easier to do it here; easy-peasy. Right, Miyatchi?”

“Yep. I get enough quiet tense atmosphere during archery club.”

Contrary to Yukimura, the two of them seem to be alright with being here.

The era of being stuck in a stuffy room, facing a desk is over.

It's a modern study method to learn while talking with a group of friends. It's degenerative evolution.

"You're the ones studying here, so if you say you can concentrate, I'll believe you. I have prepared the material for today."

The two of them prepared dispassionately as they were handed notebooks filled with liberal arts questions that targeted their weaknesses. The rows of questions were like a fireworks festival, with the stalls set up everywhere. Yukimura seemed to be pretty fired up, which was understandable.

"Aagh, today is also packed with liberal arts questions..... Yukimū has no mercy."

Even if she doesn't like studying, she has to focus on her weakest subject, so it's understandable why Hasebe would be distressed. Miyake appears as though he's close to vomiting. His hand is pressed up against the pit of his stomach while he looks at the notes.

"How can you be scared before you even start?"

"You're right..... but there's obviously more than last time, and they seem pretty difficult."

“Coming to that conclusion before we even start is a common way of thinking for students who cannot attain difficult marks. First of all, thinking about and rising up to the challenge is a basic among basics.”

Yukimura spoke, impassioned about teaching.

“Otherwise, are the questions simpler than last time?”

“Of course they’re difficult.”

“.....Really difficult, for sure.”

They probably were. It’s impossible to keep the questions simple forever.

Yukimura’s questions and explanations were quite brilliant. It might be a stretch, but I wonder if he’s skilled enough to double as a teacher.

While he does scold them he never gives up on them, and he never raises his voice when the other person doesn’t understand. Has Yukimura grown due to the influence of Horikita? I can’t believe he’s managed to change like this.

During the first semester, Yukimura and Horikita had insisted that they were placed in Class D by mistake, which feels so far behind us.

“Come on, Hasebe.”

Miyake seemed to realize that there was no use in complaining and made up his mind.

“You’re pretty motivated, Miyatchi. What’s wrong, feeling hot blooded?”

“Even though I get a break from club activities, I don’t want to spend my free time studying. Can I go home after I finish?”

“Of course.”

Yukimura and Horikita teach in different ways. Horikita would set exact time periods for proper studying, while Yukimura didn’t adhere to specific time periods. His sessions would last until they got through everything he prepared. Therefore, his sessions could be completed earlier or later than expected.

Which method is better varies from person to person, but Yukimura probably chose to do it this way because Hasebe and Miyake can both handle it to some extent.

If it was a group of students who didn’t have a very good foundation such as Ike, Yukimura’s way of going about things would be pretty difficult.

They might even write answers without thinking about the question in order to finish early.

If that happens, then just let it be and teach them until they understand.

“If you don’t have any free time, then like, just quit the club.”

“I want to participate in club activities, but I also want to have free time.”

“So Selfish~”

Either way, if they both regain their motivation, there’s nothing left to say. If one or both of them were to leave the study group, what difficulties would Horikita ask of me in the future?

The trust that Yukimura has nurtured in these sessions seems to have had a good effect on the both of them. I can’t imagine that they would hold any more doubts about Yukimura’s approach.

“Then, Ayanokōji. From today forward, I’ll have you do these too.”

“.....Yeah?”

“You should be able to get a good enough score, but your partner is Satō. You’ll have to prepare and review thoroughly. If you both drop out, there’s no way back for us.”

“No, I-”

“Do it, Ayanokōji-kun. Or should we die together?”

Hasebe’s head droops like a ghost with her bangs hanging. She grabs me by the hand as if trying to drag me to the bottom depths of a well.

“Welcome~~”

I was dragged away by a chilling creepy voice and swallowed up by the darkness of liberal arts questions.

(Intro End)

(Part 1)

“By the way, isn’t there a Yoshimoto-kun in Class C? Miyatchi, do you know?”

“Do you mean Yoshimoto Kōsetsu? He’s in the archery club.”

“Ooh yeah, that Yoshimoto-kun. I heard that he started going out with a second-year, you know?”

Tired of studying, Hasebe began to gossip.

“I hadn’t heard anything about that, but I was just thinking that he’s been in a hurry to leave early for some strange reason. So that’s what it was.”

In high school, the hurdle for dating someone even one year older is pretty high. When you're an adult in your thirties, a year or two age difference doesn't seem like it would matter very much. Although this is something I can't imagine as a teenager, this is surely how it works.

"Yoshimoto-kun has been super motivated and says that they're going to get married in the future. The man is a simple idiot."

Hasebe and Miyake slowly diverged from studying.

"You're free to talk about who's going out with whom and what the future will be like all you want, but at the very least get your work done while you do."

"I know. We're just chatting while taking a breather."

Hasebe had gotten used to this kind of thing, so she gave no indication of being shaken by Yukimura's words.

"Is that right?"

"Wow, I'm getting sarcastic vibes from you. I'm going to refill my cup."

"You're adding more sugar? I'm surprised you can even drink it that sweet."

"From my point of view, I can't understand people who drink it black. Ah!"

Hasebe tried to stand up with her empty plastic cup, but she stumbled over

the backpack at her feet and the cup in her hand fell to the ground.

My eyes unconsciously followed it as it rolled.

The cup stopped at the feet of a student who was walking past.

“Ah, sor-”

Hasebe started to apologize, but the cup was then crushed under foot, so she swallowed the words before they came out.

“You all seem to be having a good time. How about we join in?”

“What are you guys.....”

Hasebe immediately strengthened her guard and looked at the group in front of her sharply.

It was a reasonable reaction too because the man who crushed the cup was none other than Class C's Ryūen. Standing behind him was Ishizaki, Komiya, and Kondō, the often seen Class C trio.

Ryūen showed a sly smile as if he was thinking about something amusing.

There was also a lone girl who wasn't usually a part of Ryūen's group standing next to Ishizaki.

She wore an expression that was unsuitable for the situation, one that was devoid of all tension.

“Hey! Why did you step on my cup? It wasn’t an accident, was it?”

“It rolled to my feet and I thought you’d tossed it. I stepped on it to save you the effort.”

He laughed and returned the crushed cup to Hasebe with a kick.

A little bit of its contents sprinkled across the ground from a hole in the side of it. Miyake, watching in silence, stood up slowly.

“Oi Ryūen. I’ve wanted to say it for a while now, but that’s enough your punkish attitude.”

“Huh? Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?”

As if to say that Ryūen didn’t need to bother with him, Ishizaki went forward and grabbed Miyake by the lapel of his shirt.

“I wasn’t talking to you. A henchman should mind his own business, Ishizaki.”

Miyake was unmoved and knocked away Ishizaki’s hand.

“Bastard!”

Ishizaki shouted, who managed to attract attention from our surroundings even in such a noisy environment.

The person who reacted sensitively to this was none other than Ryūen.

“Shut it. Do you really want to make a scene in a place like this, Ishizaki?”

“S-sorry. Because Miyake was so cocky, I just...”

“I don’t hate emotionally impulsive idiots, but now you need to behave yourself.”

“Yes.....”

Ryūen was right. There aren’t only first years around, but also senior students, shop assistants, and several surveillance cameras. It’s a public place without any blind spots.

If an incident happened here, Class C would clearly be at fault. It’s almost certain that they would be subject to punishment based off the testimony and recordings that we would have as evidence.

“I have no business with you. I’m interested in the two people over there.”

Ryūen said so as he shifted his line of sight from Miyake over to Yukimura and me.

“Have you received my gift?”

“What the hell are you talking about.....”

Naturally, Yukimura couldn't understand what he was talking about. He looked to me as the other person Ryūen referred to. The so-called 'gift' is undoubtedly the time he sent a message with the words 'Who are you?'

“Who knows.....”

I acted as if I didn't know. Ryūen had resorted to really tough measures. I had no reason to dig my own grave by answering his questions. Even if I tried to appear more suspicious to him, he wouldn't be able to reach any conclusions. This is because no matter what happens, it's still only a gray area.

“How's that? Did you catch onto anything, Hiyori?”

Ryūen took his eyes off us for a moment and asked the girl from his class for her thoughts.

“How is it? Well, there's no telling at this stage.”

A lot of the students working under Ryūen were afraid of him, but the girl named Hiyori remained totally calm in this situation. Her somewhat out-of-focus eyes alternated between the two of us.

What was Ryūen scheming by bringing this student here?

“Both of their faces leave a weak impression, so I’ll probably forget them immediately.”

“Kukuku, don’t say that. They’re probably going to be our friends for a long time.”

“Yukimura-san..... Ayanokōji-san..... Kōenji-san, who was the other person?”

“It’s Hirata. Hirata.”

“That’s right, it was Hirata-san. Why are faces and names so hard to remember?”

She was wrapped up in a mysterious atmosphere, and I was rather concerned about Ishizaki’s use of honorifics while talking with her. I had seen her before and knew that she was a student in Class C.

“As expected, the only one you’ll remember is Kōenji.”

“He’s very unique, so he’s easy to remember.”

It seems that Ryūen has also marked Hirata and Kōenji. In the case of Kōenji, his actions were truly incomprehensible, but it’s understandable that he would be suspected because of his capability.



Having said that, it feels like Ryūen wouldn't have selected Kōenji as one of his targets if he had known that he wasn't acting but was instead a legitimate naturally-born oddball.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Ryūen? We're busy, so if you want to sort something out, let's do it quickly.”

Miyake spoke aggressively, conveying all of our feelings across with his words.

“It's nothing. We're just saying hello for today. But I'll tell you right now, I'll be seeing you again in the near future.”

“What does that mean?”

Ignoring Miyake's question, Ryūen left the cafe with his entourage.

The cafe, which was briefly enveloped in silence, immediately regained its vitality and returned to its previous state as everyone returned to their studying.

However-

The student named Hiyori remained at the scene, still watching us all this time.

Under such circumstances, there's no way that we could successfully concentrate on our studies. Irritated, Hasebe spoke up:

“What is it? You’re being a distraction by hanging around here.”

“Just a moment, please.”

“What? What does that even mean? I’m saying you’re in the way, so go someplace else, okay?”

Hasebe, who had her cup crushed just earlier, was in a foul mood.

Confronted by the rowdy Hasebe, Hiyori answered with a slightly goofy smile. She grabbed her bag at her feet and walked over to the cafe’s checkout.

“What was that about?”

“Who knows. I don’t quite understand what’s going on, and I don’t want to know.”

Yukimura seems to be unable to understand Hiyori’s actions and was temporarily lost in thought. As if he was unable to come to a conclusion, he ended up deciding to ignore the matter altogether.

“I believe she’s Shiina Hiyori from Class C. I’ve seen her before.”

It seems that only Miyake managed to remember her name.

The Shiina in question placed an order with the cafe’s clerk and came back

with two cups in hand.

“If you don’t mind, please accept this.”

“What do you mean? Why are you giving it to me?”

“You don’t have to be wary of me. I was watching what happened earlier, and it’s clear that Ryūen-kun was in the wrong. I would like to apologize on the behalf of Class C. I took the liberty of adding sugar to it myself.”

"You put in..... eh? This is totally delicious! It’s like, exactly the same as what I was drinking earlier!”

“The cup that was crushed earlier had a lot of sugar collected in the bottom, so I figured that you like your coffee sweet. I’m glad I didn’t make any mistakes.”

“But, ah, it feels like it has the exact same amount of sugar that I like added to it..... is this a coincidence?”

“I calculated in reverse based on the amount of sugar that hadn’t dissolved in your last cup.”

“Huh!? You can do that!?”

“I suppose it could be considered surprising. Despite how I look, I have a rather good perception?”

With that, she turned towards me, Yukimura, and Miyake.

“This is- You guys are holding a study session, right?”

“People like her totally drain my energy.....”

Hasebe had been irritated until just now, but she had become entirely overwhelmed by Hiyori’s inscrutable pace.

From Yukimura’s point of view, he didn’t want to risk giving Hiyori any extra information, so he quickly covered up everyone’s notes.

“By any chance, do you think I’m a spy?”

“You don’t even need to ask, of course we’re suspecting you.”

“I wouldn’t do that. After all, I normally keep my distance from Ryūen-kun.”

“But didn’t Ryūen-kun intimately call you by your name?”

“I personally requested to accompany them because I’m interested in Class D.”

The three of them couldn’t understand the reasoning behind Hiyori’s statement and tilted their heads to the side.

Of course, I imitated them, pretending to not understand the situation.

“Don’t you know? It’s a hot topic in Class C. There’s a mastermind in Class D who’s hiding their true ability. This person has apparently made huge contributions to Class D’s progress during the uninhabited island test, the test on the cruise ship, and during the sports festival. Do you really not know?”

Hiyori speaks a truth that most of Class D hasn’t been able to figure out. Of course, there were question marks hovering over Hasebe and the other’s heads.

“I have no idea. Aren’t you just talking about Horikita?”

“Yeah. I can only think of Horikita-san.”

“It’s apparently someone other than Horikita Suzune-san.”

Hiyori cut them off from coming to that conclusion.

“Ayanokōji-san, I hear that you spend a lot of time with Horikita-san.”

“It hasn’t been like that recently, but I guess I’ve spent a lot of time with her compared to anyone else.”

“After all, you do sit right next to her.”

“Still, there’s hardly anybody smarter than her.”

“Yeah, essentially all of Class D’s strategies are things she comes up with.”

Hasebe and Miyake conveniently agreed with each other at a good time, adding credibility to my statement.

I wouldn’t need to confirm or deny anything about the two of us spending time together.

It’s only important for me to tell the truth from the point of view of a typical Class D student.

“I see. You all have the same kind of evaluation of her.”

“Can you stop getting in our way by bringing up such inexplicable things?”

Yukimura spoke strongly, having been gradually influenced by Hiyori’s peculiar atmosphere.

It appears that he’s unable to bear the thought of having his study time reduced any further.

“.....I’m sorry. It’s my fault for disturbing your studies, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, but that’s how it is.”

“You really don’t have to go that far, Yukimū.”

“If you have no complaints about failing and dropping out of school, then by all means, have a good chat. I’m going home.”

“Ah, please forgive me a little. Please continue teaching me.”

Hasebe bowed her head.

“This is it. If you want to talk about strange topics, please do so after the exam.”

Yukimura ended the conversation with Hiyori almost by force, so Hiyori apologetically rose from her seat.

“I’m very sorry. It would be dangerous for you to neglect to study desperately for the exam.”

Was that a jab towards the students who were at risk of failing?

I feel like she always has a natural temperament, but it’s not clear whether she can be trusted.

“I see, Let’s talk about it after the end of the final exams. It shouldn’t be too late at that point.”

Having decided to go home, Hiyori picked up her cup.

“Thanks for the coffee, it was a real treat.”

“No no, it was nothing special. Goodbye then.”

After this, Hiyori, who had appeared together with Ryūen, also left.

I’m not certain if she’s part of Ryūen’s plan for finding me, but there’s nothing wrong with staying alert.

I’ll have to keep an eye on her for the time being.

(Part 1 End)

(Part 2)

Since we all live in the same dormitory, we all inevitably left to head back together.

Yukimura tracked the progress of today’s study session on his cell phone.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been so focused on studying. Six hours in class, plus two hours after school, right? Even students from all over the world don’t have to do that much, do they?”

“But the students of Class C wasted our time by interrupting us halfway.”

“We didn’t give in to the interference. I’d say we studied hard today.”

The two of them walked while chatting with each other, satisfied with their efforts. Hearing this, an annoyed expression surfaced on Yukimura face.

“You’re kidding. When university entrance exams begin, you’ll need to study after school for at least three hours, and if you can manage it, up to four. Of course, this means every day. And as the exam approaches, you’ll have to take the initiative and study for more than 10 hours a day.”

“Eeeh!? No way! I can’t study like that Yukimū. You should totally know that.”

“My older sister is a teacher. As if by routine, she always does this before the exam.”

“It’s an elite family lineage. Yukimū, are you also aiming to become a teacher in the future?”

“There’s nothing particularly elite about being a teacher. Besides, I’m not aiming to be a teacher. If I wanted to become a teacher, why would I ever come to a school where the teaching system is so disconnected from normal society?”

The path to becoming a teacher generally isn’t an easy one. However, it’s typically several steps less difficult than that of a lawyer or a recognized accountant, and there’s no real benefit in choosing this particular high school.

Plus, Yukimura isn't bothered by studying, and his academic capabilities are beyond average. So it's even more true.

"So why here?"

".....It doesn't matter what the reason is. Do you want to interrogate each other for their reasons for why they chose to enroll here? After you're asked to explain your circumstances, you'll understand how it feels."

Hasebe was rebuked, but unfortunately, his response ended up being counter-productive. Hasebe didn't respond with reluctance but instead took the initiative to make the first answer.

"Well, for me, I guess I was one of the people who was attracted to the schools advertising, you know? If the school promises you a job or further education after you graduate, why wouldn't you choose to come here? Isn't that like, enough to motivate most people?"

"I'll add something onto that. Another reason to come here is that the school doesn't cost a cent to attend. Not to mention that dorm life usually costs money, but we don't have to pay anything for that either. The school even allows us to live on campus without the need for private points, right? I appreciate that aspect more than the guarantee of something to do after graduation."

"That's such an exaggeration. It's really amazing to be able to work or study anywhere you want."

"You're free to talk about your dreams, but get through the final exams first."

The system that Hasebe is fantasizing over doesn't mean anything if you don't graduate from Class A."

"Can't there be some form of a bonus? Something like the school lying about only doing it for Class A, and that we'll be allowed to go wherever we want as long as we graduate properly?"

"That's impossible. If that was the case, the news would have certainly already spread among the students. But I've never heard anything like that, even during club activities. Even more than that, the second and third year Class D's still seem pretty miserable."

I've never been involved in any club activities, so I knew practically nothing about that part, but there was definitely no ambition in the third years from Class D who I had been in contact with earlier in the year.

"Even though it's a school that's under the direct administration of the state, when it's seen that the school doesn't provide any special treatment to students beyond Class A, I can imagine that it would negatively, not positively, influence my capability of getting a job or continuing on with school after I graduate because I'll be seen as a student who was unable to move up to Class A. Because of this, I absolutely must graduate as a part of Class A."

"Er... That would be the worst."

For a prestigious and well-known school, you'll be highly valued if you have both "graduation" and "personal achievement". However, as Yukimura had said, in the case of Advanced Nurturing High School, even if you graduate, there is a possibility that you may be branded as a non-Class A student. This idea is supported by the existence of students like Ike, who have underwhelming

academic potential. In short, the entry requirements here have nothing to do with your test results.

It's impossible for universities and companies to not feel suspicious after seeing this aspect of our school.

"Miyatchi, I'm surprised you're still coming to each study group. I really thought for sure that you were going to give up immediately."

"Aren't you by far the odd one here? In the first place, you don't usually want to have anything to do with boys."

"Well, I guess so... but I think that's it's okay if it's you three."

Hasebe seems to have her own ideas.

I thought it was the right time, so I decided to throw out a question.

"Hasebe, I have something ask you, alright?"

"Hm?"

"Are you and Satō close?"

"Satō-san? Nope, we're not super close or anything, and in the first place, I don't like large groups, you know? If you're interested in Satō-san, wouldn't it be better to ask Karuizawa-san?"

If that was possible, then I wouldn't be having a hard time with this.

It's a difficult problem to talk about with someone who is involved in the situation.

"What about it?"

"Erm--"

I don't know how to say it, and I know that I can't tell the truth. Yukimura noticed that I was in a bind and said:

"I understand why you feel concerned since she's your partner for the finals. It's disturbing to not know their strengths and weaknesses."

"Aah, is that so? You said that some time ago."

"Even if I wanted to ask directly, we don't have much common ground, so I can't really do that."

Giving her condolences, Hasebe put both of her hands together.

However, she thought up a new idea and made a new proposal.

"If it's hard to ask Karuizawa-san, why not ask Kyō-chan? She and Satō-san are very close, and you should be able to ask Kyō-chan, right?"

“Huh? Kyō-chan?”

I had never heard the nickname she was using before, so I had no choice but to ask who she’s talking about.

“I mean Kikyō-chan. Ayanokōji-kun, you talk with her a lot, don’t you?”

So Kikyō turns into Kyō-chan? I didn’t understand, but it makes sense now. Kushida is definitely qualified. She knows the class’s internal circumstances well, and if it wasn’t for the situation with Horikita, I probably wouldn’t have hesitated to ask her for help. However, as things are now, I don’t know if she’s someone I can rely on.

Miyake offered his support after I had declined the advice to ask Kushida for help.

“Karuizawa aside, Isn’t it alright to ask Kushida? She seems to be popular with both boys and girls. What do you think of her, Hasebe?”

“Yeah. I hate a lot of girls, but I like Kyō-chan. She takes on a lot of the hard work for the sake of the class, yet always manages to remain cheerful. I usually don’t like consulting with people, but Kyō-chan is a bit special. She’s willing to put herself in a position to listen, and would never go around talking about it to anyone.”

“Do you even have problems warranting her consultation?”

“Wow, that’s rude Miyatchi. Young girls at my age have tons of problems.”

“Like what?”

“It..... I mean, why should I tell you? You’d totally go around talking about them.”

“No, I wouldn’t..... Well, I can’t say for sure. It depends on the content.”

It’s clear that I won’t be able to discuss my troubles with these guys.

“If there’s anything you’re worried about, it really is best to discuss it with Kushida. I agree with that.”

“Right? I don’t know if you’ve got a crush on Satō-san, but she would never leak it out to anyone.”

“What? You like Satō, Ayanokōji?”

“I didn’t say anything like that. I just asked Hasebe if they were on good terms.”

“Isn’t that suspicious? You’ve never been very close to Satō-san until now, have you?”

“Ayanokōji said that he was interested in Satō because they’re a pair. Have you already forgotten?”

Even in the face of Miyake's words, Hasebe didn't withdraw.

"That's true, but it doesn't feel like that's all there is to it. The way he asked about it makes me think there's more to it."

From time to time, a girl will have an incomprehensible radar. This is the only thing I really can't beat.

"Ah, that's right. Is it okay if we stop by the convenience store for a second?"

The topic came to a natural end due to Miyake's abrupt proposal. It was a real lifesaver.

Nevertheless, it's clear that Kushida has become an indispensable existence for Class D.

Whenever you look back on what's happened so far, Kushida has always managed to become involved in it all. And yet, she never made any strong claims, and always devotedly worked on supporting others, engaging in self-sacrificing activities. And now that grassroots movement was steadily getting results.

She's one of the strongest members with a somewhat distinct personality, and none of her classmates speak ill of her.

When someone isn't around, the first things people usually say are negative ones that they can't say when they're around, but it's amazing to only hear

good things.

“Ah, me too. You two come as well.”

“You’re like a child.”

Yukimura says this, but he didn’t seem to be that unwilling.

(Part 2 End)

(Part 3)

The four of us stood outside the convenience store enjoying some ice cream that we had bought.

“Eating ice cream while it’s a bit chilly is delicious.”

Hasebe says so while carrying a scoop of vanilla ice cream on a thin wooden spoon up to her mouth.

Yukimura, on the other hand, doesn’t appear to eat ice cream very often, as he was still reading the ingredients.

“This is just a list of preservatives and food colorings.”

“Wow, how are you able to eat anything if you’re concerned about that sort of thing?”

“I’d like to pay attention to the food I eat. I started thinking about it after what happened to my physical condition during the uninhabited island exam. Now I get my food from the organic section of the supermarket at Keyaki Mall.”

“You’re a really serious guy.”

Apparently, Yukimura recently became a health-conscious individual.

“In the first place, items at the convenience store cost a lot. If you’re willing to make a small trip over to the mall, you can get the same thing at a much better price. Why not buy your groceries a bit more efficiently?”

He pointed it out by looking at Hasebe who had also bought a lot of groceries along with the ice cream.

“Yukimū, are you by any chance one of those weird penny-pinchers?”

“I’ve always cared about it. And what do you mean by Yukimū?”

“You’re Yukimura-kun, so Yukimū. When I want to make friends, I start with nicknames. Miyatchi, Yukimū, and Ayanon. Hmm, although Ayanon doesn’t flow that well.”

Before I knew it, I had been given the super-cute 'Ayanon' as a nickname.

"Don't call me Yukimū, it's embarrassing."

"You don't like it?"

".....I didn't say that I told you it's embarrassing."

"So what?"

"But in the presence of others, Yu-Yukimū is a little....."

Yukimura stopped talking. Hasebe responds to him with a straight face.

"I came to this conclusion after I realized that our relationship might not be that bad."

"A relationship worthy of a nickname?"

"Jeez, we're all, like, the type of people who stick to themselves, right?"

"Well..... That's true. I can't deny that."

"Should I say that once I tried this group thing out, I was unexpectedly comfortable with the results? And Yukimū and Ayanon also have very few friends. The second semester is more than halfway over, so I decided that I really want to establish a new friend group through these study sessions.

Therefore, I'm not trying to make up for lost time, but in order to get close to you guys as quickly as possible, I want to call you guys by either a nickname or your first name. What do you two think?"

She asked us. After it was clear that Yukimura and I were unable to answer her, Miyake responded:

"Yeah. I'm surprised myself since it isn't bad at all. I feel like I fit in. I don't get along with Sudō and his group, and Hirata feels like an entirely different existence, always surrounded by girls."

"I know, right? What about you two?"

Both Hasebe and Miyake were positive about the four of us forming a group together. Would Yukimura still refuse?

"I was only with you guys to oversee your studying. When the finals are over, the group will have served its purpose, but..... I guess these finals won't be the last time. Of course, there will be the third semester, and it also goes without saying that there will be further exams until graduation. So..... I don't mind forming something it for the sake of efficiency."

"What you're saying is confusing, but thanks nonetheless."

"Hmm..... Well. This is only to keep you guys from dropping out and lower the class's ratings any further."

"Then there's only Ayanon left, ah, but is it difficult because you're already in a group with Horikita-san? Plus you're sometimes also doing things with Ike-kun

and Yamauchi-kun.”

“I can’t say if it’s for better or worse, but at least I know that those two are pretty different from the type of person I am, as they have many aspects that I’m just not compatible with. Should I say that I don’t have to force myself when I’m around you guys? To be honest, I feel relaxed. Horikita and I just sit next to each other. We interact a lot, but I’m not particularly in a group with her.”

These were my true feelings.

“Is that so? In that case, it’s decided. We will be the Ayanokōji Group from now on. Please treat us well.”

“Wait. Why is it named after me?”

“You’re the one who brought all of us together. Are you not okay with it?”

Miyake also agreed with Hasebe’s opinion. What about Yukimura?

“I have no objections. I would be troubled if we chose to call ourselves the Yukimura group.”

He accepted it without resistance.

“One last thing before we inaugurate the group. Let’s ban the use of formal surnames from now on.”

“It’s up to you to ban them, but I won’t say Mi-Miyatchi or..... A-Ayanon or anything like that. It’s embarrassing. I’d look like an idiot.”

It would definitely feel out of place for Yukimura and me to say ‘Miyatchi’.

It was really helpful that he ended up denying it for me.

“Well, at least use the first name. By the way, my name is Haruka. You can call me whatever you want. What your first name, Miyatchi?”

“Akito.”

If that’s the case, that’s what we should call you then? Hasebe had a proud expression.

“Akito huh. Well, that’s manageable. Ayanokōji’s is Kiyotaka, right?”

We stayed in the same room during the cruise, so Yukimura appears to have remembered my name.

“And I believe Yukimura’s first name is Teruhiko.”

I also thought back to the exam on the ship. Yukimura’s expression suddenly became cloudy for some reason after I had said this.

“.....You remembered?”

Instead of being impressed, Yukimura looked troubled.

“Oh, so Yukimū’s first name is Teruhiko. Should I think of another nickname?”

“Stop it.”

He responded with a strong tone, and Hasebe shrunk back a little bit.

“Is something wrong?”

When I asked Yukimura about his sudden change in attitude, he gave an unexpected response.

“I’m fine with calling you guys by your given names, but could you stop calling me Teruhiko?”

He actually made such a proposal.

“That is, it’s alright for you to use our first names, but it’s not alright for us to do it to you!?”

“It’s not that I don’t like any of you guys. It’s just that I hate my given name. I usually don’t mind because nobody had ever used my given name before, but this situation makes things different.”

“It’s not a particularly unique baby name nowadays, isn’t it pretty common?”

Miyake understandably finds it strange.

The name Teruhiko is definitely one of the more standard, usual names.

I don't think the name is the type that I'd end up hating.

"Is there any special reason?"

".....Ah. Teruhiko was the name chosen for me by my mother, a cowardly woman who abandoned me and my father when I was little. This is why I can't possibly accept it."

Hasebe and Miyake's faces tightened after they learned that there was a heavier reason for it than they had expected.

Yukimura noticed this and immediately decided to end the conversation.

"Sorry, I said something unnecessary."

"Nope, that was my bad. I went ahead and used your first name without your permission."

"It's not something you need to apologize for. It's only to be expected since you didn't understand the situation. Plus it's not typical for someone to dislike their given name. If possible, I don't want to ruin the atmosphere of the group. If none of you mind, I'd like it if you'd call me Keisei moving forward. It's the name I've been using since I was a child."

“Keisei? Does that mean Yukimū has two given names? This is pretty complicated.”

“Keisei isn’t my naturally given name. It’s the name my father wanted me to have. Since the day my mother left home, I’ve made it my own. If you find it unacceptable, I hope you’ll call me Yukimura just like you’ve been doing.”

If this is what Yukimura wanted, we wouldn’t be able to pursue it any further.

Besides, it isn’t surprising for someone to use more than one name.

It isn’t only celebrities who do it, but even people of the general public.

“It wasn’t my intention to use such an insensitive name, but that’s not what matters, is it?”

“Yeah true. In which case, my best regards, Keisei.”

As Hasebe said, we all chose to call him by the name that he wanted us to use.

“Sorry for my selfishness..... Kiyotaka, Akito, Haruka.”

Yukimura addressed everyone by their given name again.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. More or less, people have their own circumstances.”

Exactly. Just like how I have a past that I don't want to be exposed or for people to know about, Yukimura... no, Keisei also has a past that he carries.

I attempted to say their names out loud in the same way Keisei did.

"Akito, Keisei, and..... Haruka. Right. I've also remembered them."

It's more stressful to call a girl by her first name than to do it for a boy.

"Anyways, Kiyotaka-"

Haruka seems to have gotten caught up with my nickname again.

"Not Ayanon, but how about Kiyopon? Yeah, this one flows much better, so I think it's an easy decision. Yukimū, do you want to call him that too?"

Wow, I feel like I've been given a more shameful nickname than Ayanon.

Thinking of being called this in front of the general public from now on gives me goosebumps.

"I won't call him that, it's too embarrassing. I've already decided to call him Kiyotaka."

Embarrassment aside, we ultimately decided to use our first names for each other.

At first, we weren't able to find the right way to say it, but the flow of things had started to seem much more natural and there weren't any more problems with that.

I looked behind me. It felt like the conversation was at a good place for me to discreetly check on the presence in the background.

Are you just going to stay there and listen in silence, Sakura?

Every time that we've gathered for a study session, Sakura has followed behind us.

Same with the cafe today. Moreover, she was also currently watching us from a distance now.

She can't hear everything that we're saying, but she should just barely be able to hear enough to understand.

Right now, while our group is being formed is her last chance.

If she doesn't insert into the conversation here...

"Well! Now we've all learned each other's names. So, the four of us will group u-"

"F... For-forgive me!"

Bang! The trash can nearby made a loud sound. At the same time, a single student stood up.

Of course, it goes without saying that it was Sakura. She rigidly stepped out and nervously walked up to us with robotic movement.

“Sakura?”

The three of them said her name at almost the same time.

“I... I..... I also want to join Ayanokōji-kun’s group!”

Unable to show her face for the longest time, Sakura amassed every ounce of her courage and then uttered the words.

Her face was visibly flushed with nervousness. Since she wasn’t paying attention, she hadn’t noticed that her fake glasses were sitting crooked in an amusing position.

“Do you want to join the group because you’re afraid that you’ll fail the exam? Given Sakura’s scores and partner, it’s not unreasonable for you to be uneasy about it.”

Keisei calmly endeavored to analyze Sakura’s arrival, and then came to a conclusion.

“Based on how I see it, I think you should join Horikita’s group. I’m not capable enough to teach very many people. Besides, your situation is different

from theirs, so the content that you'll need to be taught would be different as well."

Sakura mustered the courage to say something, but was unfortunately dismissed by Keisei's collected response.

"It's n... It's not like that..... I genuinely want to join Ayanokōji-kun's group!"

When you travel, you don't care about losing face. A train that has started will not stop. Sakura's resolve wouldn't falter from just this. She expressed her feelings once again.

"Isn't it fine? Sakura can join us. After all, she seems to fit in."

Akito spoke, welcoming the unexpected visitor.

"Is it okay? Letting someone join so easily."

"Does adding one person make any difference? Besides, there are no qualifications required to join our group. We're all loners anyways, so I think it's fine."

"We're all loners? I suppose so."

It's well-known that Sakura is also often alone in Class D.

"Keisei, are you also okay?"

“I have no reason to object, but I don’t want it to increase more than this. Sakura makes it easy, but if someone noisy joins, I’m leaving.”

“Th-Thank you, Miyake-kun..... Yukimura-kun.....”

Despite there being some conditions attached, Keisei agreed. The rest was up to Haruka.

Haruka usually gives the impression of being the most receptive, but this time there was no smile on her face.

“Sorry, Sakura-san, but that isn’t going to convince me.”

“Ah, well, uh..... I... I can’t.....?”

Haruka maintains her stern expression and confronts Sakura as if to pour cold water on her long-awaited reception.

“In my case, should I say that I’m really looking forward being a part of the group? I feel like I’m going to get along really well with everyone for a while. So-”

She pointed her index finger straight upwards and held it before Sakura’s eyes.

“Since you want to participate in our group, there’s an obligation for us to call each other by either a nickname or their given name. This means that Sakura-

san will have to be called..... Er-..... What's her name again?"

"Airi."

I added quickly.

"We'll call you Airi, and you'll have to call everyone by their names as well. Are you okay with that?"

Everyone more or less understood that Sakura wasn't very good with interpersonal relationships, which is why she was given this advice:

'Can you tolerate such a situation?' She confirmed the answer.

"Eh, well....."

I decided to try my best at helping the confused Sakura. If Haruka decided to require nicknames here, the things would become more difficult.

"Keisei, Akito, and Haruka."

I elaborated the first names of Yukimura, Miyake, and Hasebe in order.

".....Ke-Keisei-kun, Akito-kun, and Haruka-san..... phew."

She desperately squeezed out the names in a faint voice.

“There’s no need to use an honorific, is there?”

“Yeah. It’s fine as long as it’s the first name. Now, there’s only Kiyopon left.”

Sakura looked at me in a daze, her face slowly flushing with red. I understood how she was feeling, having to suddenly call three people by their first names. The only thing left for her is to address me.

“Hyyu!”

A mysterious sound escaped out of Sakura’s mouth.

“You seem to have like, gotten really close to Kiyopon in the past. Shouldn’t that be more than enough for you to say it?”

Haruka spoke, looking to pursue after her and attack. She was just like an examiner.

“Kiyotaka is fine.”

It’s much too difficult to call someone Kiyopon anyway. It’s embarrassing even when said internally.

“K-Kiyo, Kiyo…… piyo……!”

Everyone’s eyes were on Sakura, so even if she was unwilling, the pressure

was still rising.

It was a problem that spiraled further and further out of control as more time passed by.

“I don’t know how the group is going to affect you, but at the very least, I think it’s necessary for you right now. You’ve taken one big step already so it shouldn’t be scary to take it one step further.”

I spoke gently in order to convey that I had her back.

“.....Yeah.....K-Kiyotaka-kun. Please be kind to me from now on.”

After a brief, determined silence, Sakura looked straight into my eyes and said so.

“Yep, you passed! I also agree with having Airi join us.”

Thus, Sakura’s inclusion was unanimously approved.

“Kiyopon, try calling Airi by name properly as well.”

“Er..... Airi.”

“Y-Yes!”

While we were nervous and stiff, we both managed to successfully call each

other by name.

“Well, let’s do it once more. The five of us are the Kiyopon Group, so please treat us well.”

My name being selected as the namesake of the group doesn’t seem to change no matter who ends up joining it.

(Part 3 End)

(Part 4)

The Ayanokōji Group (saying it still invokes a sense of shame), was established, and we had officially decided to start our activities along with Airi. Originally intended to act as support for Haruka and Akito, the scope of the group began to expand little by little. Haruka indirectly led the group by creating a group chat. There was a dramatic increase in communication during the periods where everyone wasn’t together. Since none of us have many friends and we usually spend a lot of time alone, our conversations in the group chat were pretty lively and frequent.

[After studying tomorrow, do you all want to go to the movies together for a change of pace?]

Haruka posed a question in the chat.

[You're talking about the new movie?]

[Yup! I heard it's coming out tomorrow. Exams are going on now, so getting tickets is unexpectedly easy!]

[It's not a bad idea for rejuvenation purposes. By 'you all', does that mean I also have to join?]

[Of course you do; it would be meaningless if Yukimū didn't join us. The group is just beginning, after all. But I guess I did ask everyone pretty suddenly. If you don't have time tomorrow, we can wait until after the exams.]

If there's a shortage of people, it appears that she intends to postpone it.

It doesn't look like Akito has seen the messages yet, but if he had, he'd probably choose to go along with her. Both Keisei and Airi haven't given their answers yet. Should I take the lead?

Even though I was a little bit nervous, I responded to the group chat.

[I'll participate.]

After I sent this, a message came from Airi a few seconds later.

[I want to go, too.]

[.....I get it. If Akito goes, I'll go too.]

With this, other than the absent Akito, everyone agreed to attend. Akito opened the group chat a few minutes later, and sent his own response.

[Alright. I'm curious about that movie too. Can you make our reservations?]

[Yeah. I'll collect the points from all of you later. Thanks everyone!]

The group chat then died off. She had probably switched her screen over to the Internet in order to make reservations.

[I'm looking forward to the movie.]

A personal text came from Airi.

[Yeah true.]

[Please take care of me tomorrow, Kiyotaka-kun. Good night.]

Airi ended our brief conversation with a polite message.

“So I'm going to the movies tomorrow with the group?”

Somehow, I guess my life is becoming a little bit more like a riajuu.

Society would probably think this, but I definitely have a feeling of excitement that I haven't ever felt before.

“.....I'll have to go to bed early so I'm not late.”

My phone rang at this moment.

I answered the phone when I saw the name 'Horikita Suzune' on the caller ID.

“It seems that you're awake.”

“It's still 10 o'clock. Do you need something?”

“The study groups at the library are almost done. After the study session tomorrow, I'd like to make some final arrangements for the final exam. Can you join me? If you can also tell Yukimura-kun for me, it will save me the trouble.”

“Tomorrow.....”

“Is there a problem?”

It would be lying to say there wasn't one.

Since we had all agreed to go to the movies after studying tomorrow.

“If it’s inconvenient, the day after tomorrow is fine, but Thursday is the limit. The questions are almost all completed, but in some cases, we’ll need to rethink the answers.”

She seemed intent on making those decisions as soon as possible.

Even in this situation, I don’t want to turn my back on her expectations. She’s probably already consulted with Hirata, but still wanted to use the time leftover to become as certain as possible.

“I see. I’ll talk to Keisei. Does it matter if we’re a little late? Also, if it’s better to get in touch with Hirata or Karuizawa first, I can do it.”

“Keisei? You and Yukimura have become surprisingly close. You also don’t need to worry about their schedules since I’ve already spoken to them. I’ll inform them of the date and time.”

It seems that Horikita has also managed to get closer to the others through the study sessions. I’m happy that she was able to start a conversation with Hirata and the others even while alone.

I hung up the phone, and a moment later I received another text. Things are really coming up tonight.

This time it wasn’t from Airi, but instead from Karuizawa.

[I’ve confirmed it as you said. Today, I heard from somebody that a girl was asking around about how much sugar Hasebe-san had added to her cup. She wasn't able to find out anything and added sugar based on what was left over,

which attracted some attention since she added so much.]

As I thought, that's what happened after all.

This means that she's quick-witted, even more so than just having superior insight. Hiyori picked a good opportunity to shake us up by showing off her powers of observation back then.

Right now is a perfect opportunity. I'll tell her about it first.

[I think Horikita is going to contact you tomorrow. We have arranged to start a meeting at around twenty o'clock.]

[Eight at night? Isn't that pretty late?]

[I have some prior arrangements. I'm going to see a movie after the study session.]

[A movie? Is it that new one?]

[That's the one. Regardless, I have a favor to ask of you during the meeting.]

I gave Karuizawa detailed instructions.

I didn't have any other option than to use tomorrow's meeting.

After she read everything, she responded with a seemingly annoyed message.

[Isn't this just another troublesome errand? What's the point?]

[I'll explain when everything is over. It's better for you this way.]

[Yeah whatever. I'll see you tomorrow then.]

Karuizawa immediately dropped it. But instantly after that, I received another message.

It wasn't a message, it was an illustration on a small sticker.

It was of a cute round strawberry cake with a few candles put on top.

[I noticed too late.]

It was followed by this additional message, and she didn't send anything else after that.

"She... Did she find out about my birthday? But how?"

I don't remember telling anyone about my birthday. Despite thinking this, I realized the truth. On the chat app, there's a field for a date of birth along with a name and email address. Since I hadn't chosen to keep that information private, it was possible to access this information if someone wanted to.

I had thought that there was absolutely no chance of it happening this year.

Was Karuizawa the first person to notice my birthday?

Customarily, I began to erase everything after our exchange finished.

Although I was a bit hesitant, I also deleted her birthday sticker.

I immediately accessed Karuizawa's profile and noticed that her birthday was March 8th.

"I guess I should memorize it for the time being."

(Part 4 End)

(Part 5)

Today's classes felt surprisingly long.

Maybe it's because I've gradually begun to look forward to the study sessions with my friends after school.

I headed to the cinema with Yukimura and the others.

“It feels exciting going out with everybody... Ki-Kiyotaka-kun”

Speaking reservedly, Airi also expressed her excitement next to me.

In spite of the thought that she’s as innocent as a child, I also felt the same way.

What can I say? I’m childish too.

“Yeah true. It’s not an unpleasant feeling.”

“Ehehehe..... Kiyotaka-kun.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You called my name right?”

“.....D-Did I call for you!? I-I’m sorry, it’s not like that at all!”

I didn't think I misheard, but Airi denied having called out for me.

We arrived at Keyaki Mall and headed straight towards the cinema.

Haruka had ordered the tickets in advance, so she handed them out to

everyone one by one.

“I’ve been looking forward to-”

“Ayanokōji-kun!”

A voice called out to us from in the distance. Maya Satō, why is she here...

“Are you by any chance going to the movies right now? Ah! That super popular one!”

She spoke excitedly after seeing the movie ticket in my hand.

“Actually, I came to see that movie, too. Karuizawa-san and the others came too!”

“.....Looks like it.”

Several girls approached in a crowd from behind Satō.

“Were you invited by Karuizawa?”

“Nope. When I was talking about how I wanted to go to the movies during our study session, Karuizawa-san said she wanted to go too, so we decided to go together. Since it’s a rare opportunity, let’s go watch it together!”

Having said that, Satō grabbed my arm with both hands.

“Fuua!?”

Behind me, Airi makes a sound somewhat similar to a scream.

“He-Hey, stop it.”

“Eh? How come~? What does it matter.”

Satō spoke casually, but her face was a little red. It seems like she’s trying hard to overdo it.

“What a coincidence, Yukimura-kun and Ayanokōji-kun. Hasebe-san and Sakura-san as well.”

Karuizawa spoke, giving off a bit of a condescending attitude.



It wasn't a coincidence at all. I had told her just the night before that I would be going to the movies. However, I didn't expect Karuizawa to come herself.

".....What an unpleasant coincidence. I'm going inside."

With of look of resentment, Keisei handed over his ticket and went inside the cinema.

"In which case, I'll go as well....."

Separating myself from Satō by force, I followed after Keisei and the others.

The inside of the theater was packed full with enough students to entirely fill all the seats. The fragrant smell of popcorn and roasted hot dog stimulated my nostrils.

We had reserved the five seats in the highest row at the very end, counting from the right.

Satō, Karuizawa, and the rest of their group appeared to be concerned about what to buy at the shop and hadn't come in yet.

"Um, K-Kiyotaka-kun."

As I sat in my seat, Airi quietly whispered in my ear from the seat next to me. Since all of the other students around us were chatting happily, I didn't think she needed to speak so softly.

“What’s the matter?”

“Kiyotaka-kun... well... has been getting along really well with Satō-san recently, right.....?”

Considering what had just happened, it would be impossible not to think so.

However, if I don’t strictly deny something when it isn’t true, it’ll be hard to stop if the rumor spreads.

“It’s just a misunderstanding. Satō and I were paired for the finals so we’ve studied together a couple of times.”

“B-but, people don’t usually walk arm in arm?”

“That wasn't arm in arm, that was being latched onto.”

“I feel that, if you dislike it you could shake her off.....”

Airi responds with a timid, yet accurate retort. That certainly may be the case.

I had become passive while going with the flow of things, but it's not a good idea to accept misunderstandings like this.

“I see. I don't think there will be a next time, but I’ll be careful.”

“A-And Besides.....”

There’s still something else.....

“Before the pairs were chosen, you went somewhere alone with Satō-san, right?”

That being said, when Satō had asked me to follow her, Airi did seem to be looking at me in the classroom.

“.....B-between you two, is there anything.....”

“No.”

Saying no might be a lie, but at most I was only asked for my contact information.

Airi and I have also exchanged contact information, so this isn’t something for me to feel guilty over.

“Not convinced?”

“N-no. S-sorry. I'm asking you all kinds of strange things..... Did I make you uncomfortable.....?”

“Not at all. If there’s something you are worried about, you can tell me any time.”

“L-leave it to me! I will properly keep my eye on you, Kiyotaka-kun!”

No. It's stressful to have you observed me so closely.....

I couldn't bear to deny Airi, who had made a slightly triumphant gesture, so I swallowed the words.

Nothing special happened after that, so I enjoyed the movie in peace.

Although there was something somewhat odd about the content of the film.

(Part 5 End)

(Part 6)

There are various commercial facilities at the Keyaki Mall. Most of the stores are used on a daily basis, like the supermarkets. However, there are multiple shops that only see occasional use. For example, there's a service that delivers supermarket ingredients to your dorm room and a specialty store that fixes electric, gas, and water issues. The laundromat is another perfect example of this. A salaryman or another member of the outside community would have a good reason to typically use a laundromat, but it isn't relevant to the students of this school. However, when a blazer or another part of our uniforms gets

unusually dirty, the laundromat plays an important role by cleaning what we can't clean on our own.

Even if it isn't something you usually use, the time will come suddenly when it's needed.

It's Thursday night at 8:00 with the exam coming up on the weekend. The shops on campus had already reached closing time, so everyone from Class D gathered at a karaoke room. It's a great place to make arrangements without worrying about anything leaking outside.

Horikita and Hirata acted quickly. The group was the same as from the start of the final examination, with the addition of Keisei.

It's true that it would have been more ideal to do this in someone's room, but one of us didn't want to do that.

"Hey, can I sing?"

"Wait, Karuizawa-san. That's not what we're here for today."

"Even though there's karaoke right here?"

"Since you said that you didn't want to go to the dorms, we came here. Isn't that right?"

You don't know who's watching or listening in a cafe or cafeteria elsewhere on campus.

“That’s right, but what should I say? Isn’t it kind of stupid to go to karaoke and not sing?”

“Make do with your food and drinks.”

Karuizawa had ordered plenty already. Her own personal drink, as well as junk food such as potato fries and drinks for everyone else, sat on the table.

“Then let’s sing a duet together after the strategy meeting is over, Yōsuke-kun.”

“Yeah. It might be a good idea to take a breather after the meeting is adjourned.”

“I’ll agree to that. I want to have a proper celebration, but it's also been quite a long time since I’ve gotten to do karaoke.”

Hirata and Kushida searched for a compromise by agreeing with both Horikita and Karuizawa.

“.....I’m going to start.”

Horikita simply ignored the two of them and began the meeting.

“First up is the results from the study sessions, and to be honest, I think that they’re excellent. In the beginning, the behavior of the boys was a mess, and I worried about how it would turn out. Fortunately, they’ve studied hard and

should be able to cope with the final exam to some extent.”

"Just so you know, I studied so hard that my mouth is now an English dictionary!"

Sudō appealed that he had studied in his own way, but the way he phrased it made it difficult to understand.

“Sudō-kun has grown significantly compared to where he started from. His concentration has dramatically improved in particular. However, don’t forget that your basic academic abilities are still inferior to a first-year middle school student’s.”

“I’ve studied so hard and I’m still only at first-year middle school level.....”

“The fact that you were at an elementary school level up until now is kind of amazing.”

“Ho-Horikita-san, that’s going a little too far.....”

“He didn’t even know that pi existed until recently.”

It was a pretty explosive statement. It’s unexpected for him to have lived until today without knowing about the existence of pi.

“Eeeh? Isn’t that too stupid!?”

Even Karuizawa, who doesn't study very much herself, gives an overreaction.

"Shut up, Karuizawa. You don't even understand it yourself."

"No, no, no. Seriously. Even I knew it was 3.14."

The conversation managed to descend into something trivial. Everyone who had to listen to it might end up with headaches.

"Please stop it. I can roughly see what level your academic ability is. Is he really okay, Horikita?"

"It's pointless to worry about him. Like I said, his basic academic skills are behind. But, he generally understands the content that he needs to for this semester. It's not like he's facing the exam expecting to fail. Have the problems with Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun been resolved on your end, Yukimura-kun?"

"Of course. Ayanokōji was watching closely, so he can verify this, isn't that right?"

"I don't think there was a better way to approach it. I have no concerns about them failing the finals."

"Great! I'd absolutely hate to lose someone from Class D, so let's all overcome this together!"

".....Something like that. Speaking of which, are we really okay?"

After hearing Kushida's thoughts, Karuizawa asked an unsettling question.

“I don’t want fewer classmates, but this is a test that someone drops out of every year, right? There is no guarantee that Sudō-kun or I won’t fail, right?”

“I can’t really guarantee you it, but-”

“Then don’t say something like that so rashly in the first place.”

The relaxed atmosphere of the room gradually began to tense up.

“Kushida-san, I’ve always felt like you’ve been giving me lip service for a while now.”

“Is that so..... I just want everyone to pass the exam safely.....”

“It must be nice to be smart. You don’t even know what will happen to me.”

“It’s okay, Karuizawa-san. You’re involved in a reliable study group now.”

Even with Hirata backing her up, Karuizawa seemed entirely unconvinced.

“I've wanted to say this for a while now. Kushida-san, aren’t you behaving a little bit goody-goody?”

“Eh?..... D-Do you really think so.....”

“Can you calm down, Karuizawa-san? We are in the middle of having a discussion about the finals right now. Don’t waste our time with unrelated matters.”

“Horikita-san, shut up a little. Hey, Kushida-san. Are you perhaps mocking my intelligence in your mind or something?”

“I wouldn’t do something like that.”

“In that case, don’t make promises like that. Since it’s hard for me every time I take an exam, can you take responsibility if I fail?”

This was too irrational. Faced with such inexplicable anger, it wasn’t just Kushida, but the entire study group was confused.

Karuizawa lost it due to Kushida’s positivity and kindness.

She then reached out and picked up the grape juice that she had barely touched, and proceeded to pour it out onto Kushida with all her might. The juice and all of its staining properties, soaked into the chest of her blazer.

“Karuizawa-san!”

In the face of this unbelievable situation, Hirata let out an usually loud voice as he grabbed her hand that was holding the cup.

“You can’t do this. I feel like there are things that simply cross the line.”

“A-are you saying..... this is my fault?”

“I’m sorry, but this situation only puts you in a bad light, Karuizawa-san. Kushida-san hasn’t done anything wrong.”

This was an action that even Horikita, who was in midst of a Cold War with Kushida, could not defend.

“I’m fine. I don’t mind at all, okay? Please don’t blame Karuizawa-san.”

“That’s not happening. No matter how you think of it, it’s all Karuizawa’s fault.”

Keisei spoke his mind and judged the situation objectively. It’s entirely natural for everyone present to be hostile towards what had happened. No matter how anyone came to see it, they would think Karuizawa was in the wrong for her self-righteous remarks. Nevertheless, her actions weren’t unnatural. Karuizawa has always been this kind of girl.

“Oh, riiight. I'm the only bad guy. Yeah, after all, Kushida-san is the star of the class.”

All the people present, except me, had already made their judgments.

Karuizawa turned towards me as if to ask for my help.

“Hey, Ayanokōji-kun, who are you siding with?”

“Who I agree with... Nobody here has said anything incorrect. You’re in the wrong.”

“Well, that’s it. I knew it would be. Everyone is my enemy.”

Karuizawa got up and picked up her bag without even apologizing.

“Karuizawa-san. If you leave things in a weird state like this, you’ll definitely regret it later. I don’t want things to be like that either.”

Hirata was adamant about stopping Karuizawa from leaving the karaoke room.

“What? What the hell else am I supposed to do?”

“First of all, apologize to Kushida-san. That’s the most important thing.”

Karuizawa was persuaded by her boyfriend. She looked frustrated, but she ultimately stepped down.

“I don’t think I’m in the wrong, but I have to apologize?”

“You have to say it first.”

At this, Karuizawa stood in silence for a moment.

“.....Sorry.”

After her moment of silence, Karuizawa gave in and apologized after being admonished by Hirata.

“No, it’s not a problem at all. I think I should’ve also been a little more considerate to your feelings.”

In this situation, an angry response wouldn’t be abnormal, however, Kushida was entirely calm, and forgave Karuizawa.

Hearing this, Karuizawa appeared to feel guilty, and returned to sit down next to Hirata.

“I feel like I had lost my cool a little. Sorry.”

Karuizawa apologized once again to Kushida, who responded with a smile as if say to forget about it.

“Thank you.....”

Hirata breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the two of them.

However, this doesn’t mean everything has been resolved.

“Kushida-san, do you have a spare blazer that you can wear to school tomorrow? All good?”

“Ah, no. My other one had gotten damaged, so this one is the last one I have left.....”

The school originally paid for each student to have two blazers. But sometimes unexpected things might happen like a student might outgrow a part of their uniform. At that time, if necessary, there is a shop in Keyaki Mall that specializes in student uniforms. However, it can take some time to tailor the uniforms to fit the students, and it isn't cheap on points as well.

“Isn't there a laundromat? I can bring it with some clothes I've soiled during basketball practice. If I hand it over to them today, you should be able to get it back by early tomorrow morning.”

“I've never heard about it since I've never had a reason to use it. If this is the case, then it seems like there's a solution somehow.”

Kushida accepted Sudō's great advice and grasped how to solve the problem.

Karuizawa heard his suggestion, and made a proposal herself as if realizing that she could do something more to help.

“Although it doesn't work as an apology, please allow me to pay the cleaning fee.”

“It's alright, I don't mind it.”

“Should I say that I won't be able to feel at ease..... can't I?”

“Is it really okay?”

“Yup! I’m the one at fault here, so please let me do it.”

Thus, the situation found a point of compromise due to Karuizawa offering to pay the cleaning fee.

(Part 6 End)

(Part 7)

While I was heading back to the dormitory after the end of the chaotic strategy meeting, I came across a large man standing next to the water fountain.

Katsuragi didn't seem to have any appointments with anyone else, so I attempted to call out to him.

“What are you doing?”

“Ayanokōji. No, I was thinking a little bit about things. It’s about the final exam next week.”

“About the final exam? In a place like this?”

“I just want to spend my time thinking alone in peace.”

This didn't seem like the way of thinking that one would expect from a first-year high school student.

That being said, the final exam? I don't think it's an exam that the academically advanced Class A has to agonize over.

“Do you feel like this final exam is going to go over well?”

Since he asked that way, I decided to respond straightforwardly.

“Who knows, but everyone appears to be studying earnestly.”

“Is that so? It would be nice for there to be no dropouts.”

I didn't feel any enthusiasm in his worry for others.

“Did something happen?”

After I asked, Katsuragi began to speak in a way that seemed a little heavy.

“.....When you were in middle school, did you ever hold the position of class

representative or join the student council?”

“No, not at all. I was never interested.”

“I’ve always been a class representative or a member of the student council ever since I was in elementary school. I even served as student council president in both elementary and middle school. But, after coming to this school, I’ve had to make some large adjustments.”

“This reminds me that you haven’t entered the student council.”

“I wanted to join, but I was unable to get student council president Horikita’s recognition.”

This topic was entirely unrelated to the topic of the final exams.

“Student council and classroom representatives seem to have no authority at first glance. Most students think that it’s not worth it. They only think that it takes a lot of time and effort, so only a few people want to do it.”

It's the same feeling that I have about it. Basically, I don't want to be in a management position or anything like that.

“However, these positions are given ‘privilege’. In other words, there is a difference that can’t be covered between those in these positions and those who aren’t. And I have lost that privilege.”

“Your evaluation within Class A should be above a certain level.”

“If that was the case, I would have never chosen to target Class B for the final exam.”

I think so too. Someone like Katsuragi would choose target Class C or Class D.

He would choose the right tactic to both ensure defense and victory.

“Is it alright? To tell me about the internal conditions of Class A.”

“You’ll understand it even after a minimal amount of analysis.”

“You don't need to take on too much responsibility, you know? It appears to me that you’re leading Class A, but that’s not the whole picture. Anyway, as it is now, Class A is like a fortress. The important thing is for you guys to maintain your current position.”

“.....That's right. Aah, to be so told by Class D who should be the ones chasing after us.”

“Maybe there are things that can only be seen objectively since I’m looking at things from too far away to catch up.”

When the two of us returned to the dormitory, there was a crowd of people in the lobby.

“It’s really noisy. Did something happen?”

“Uh... Want to ask around?”

Nearby there was a face I knew, The Professor, so I called out to him.

“What happened?”

“It’s Ayanokōji, His Highness. It seems that everyone in the first year has received the same letter in their mailboxes.”

“The same letter?”

I walked through the crowd and turned the dial key on my mailbox. The mailboxes aren’t typically used, but they have occasional use for online shopping, school notifications, and student to student transactions.

The other students seemed interested as well, peering from behind me at my open mailbox.

I unlocked the door after dialing the right combination.

I then took out the four-way folded paper that was inside and returned to Sotomura.

“Is this it?”

“It is, it is.”

Katsuragi came back a moment later with the same paper.

Katsuragi opened the letter at the same time I opened the folded paper.

The words printed inside read:

[First-year student Ichinose Honami of Class B might be collecting points illegally. - Ryūen Kakeru.]

Sotomura opened up his own paper to show us that he had gotten the same thing as well.

Katsuragi finished reading the paper and mumbled:

“What does he mean by neatly writing down his own name? If this is unfounded, there’s a chance that he’ll face responsibility.”

“Does that mean he’s doing it because it’s more or less true?”

“If that’s not the case, then it’s a foolish plan. But it’s a method I wouldn’t put past him. Regardless of whether it’s true or not, he should be taking the offensive if there’s material that people might think is illegal. Properly speaking, it could be illegal defamation, but that guy wouldn’t even care about that at all.”

If it's a lie, Ryūen's image is at risk of being badly tarnished, but since Ryūen's reputation is already poor, and from his point of view it wouldn't matter at all.

“Oi, Ryūen's back!”

One of the students discovers Ryūen returning back from school.

Ryūen entered the lobby. I wonder if he knows what had caused the commotion.

“Oi, Ryūen. What are you trying to do!?”

As soon as he entered the lobby, the boys in Class B questioned him while going up and grabbing him.

“Ah, what the hell are you talking about?”

“It's about this letter! You're distributing this crap!”

He said so and thrust the letter in front of him. When Ryūen saw the letter, he simply shrugged and smiled.

“Oh, that? Isn't it interesting?”

“What's funny about it!? There are some things you can do, and there are something that cross the line!”

“Then prove it. That Ichinose hasn’t been illegally collecting points.”

“That’s-”

“How about it, Ichinose?”

Facing Ichinose, who had come after hearing the commotion, Ryūen asked, holding the letter.

“No matter what I say here now, Ryūen-kun probably won’t believe it, right?”

“Indeed. That’s because it’s up to the school to decide whether there was fraud or not.”



“Right. I’m sorry everyone. I seem to be under a strange suspicion. But rest assured, tomorrow I will report it to the teacher and prove that this is Ryūen-kun’s misunderstanding.”

Ichinose stands up for herself with a dignified appearance.

“How do you intend to prove it to me, Ichinose?”

“I’ll explain the details to the school. I’ll state how many points I have and how I got them. You’ll be satisfied with that, won’t you?”

“Report it to the school? Before that, can’t you explain it here?”

“So now you’re willing to believe me just by saying it here, Ryūen-kun?”

“I won’t believe it. It’d be as easy as breathing for you to lie about it.”

“Therefore, if the school mediates this, there’s no room for injustice.”

“Kuku, I see. You have a point as well.”

‘Are you convinced!?’ The nearby Class B students yelled.

“However, humans are dirty, lying creatures. Isn’t it possible that you’re now thinking of some countermeasures and covering up the evidence?”

Even until the end, Ryūen aggressively lashes out against Ichinose.

“What’s this man thinking? Even if Ichinose has a lot of points, she’s far from the kind of person who would get them illegally. He has no chance of winning by obstinately accusing her here.”

Katsuragi seemed to find it hard to understand, and his expression became more serious.

“Then what do I have to do to make you believe me?”

“Let’s start by disclosing how many points you hold here first, and then explain how you got them. Then I’ll report the same thing to the school tomorrow. With this, the students who are increasingly distrustful of you here will be convinced.”

It’s indeed true that it would drastically reduce her chances of later making excuses or lying.

However, I don’t think Ichinose will agree easily.

“That’s an impossible proposition, Ryūen-kun.”

“That is to say, you admit to breaking the rules?”

“It's not like that. Just because I didn't get my points illegally, doesn't mean that I can reveal my hand. How many personal points someone has will greatly influence their strategies in the future.”

That is, even if she's temporarily suspected, she has to hide her hand.

"As long as I explain it to the school tomorrow, it should be investigated. Plus if I broke a rule, regardless of whether I try to hide it or not, everything will be made public, right?"

"There's no proof that you'll be reporting to the school tomorrow."

"Then, you can tell them yourself, Ryūen-kun. As it says in this letter."

"Really? Kuku, you seem quite confident."

If Ichinose illegally collected points, she should be feeling quite uneasy about it.

However, she didn't waver at all. She remained dignified as always.

"Then I look forward to tomorrow."

Ichinose watched Ryūen, who got into the elevator and left with a fearless smile.

"Once suspected, the doubt will remain until it's completely dispelled. A like Ichinose is no exception. The greater the doubt, the greater the trust that is instantly lost."

Katsuragi analyzed the situation and gave a correct conjecture. That also applies to the politicians who represent our country. No matter how much support they currently have, one damaging 'lie' can make them lose that support.

Of course, if they know it's just nonsense, their support may be raised higher than before, but for the most part, it's impossible to completely eliminate suspicion.

The next day, what Ichinose said became reality. The school issued a notice that said she hadn't broken any rules. She took the school as a guarantor and safely dispelled all doubts.

By chance, I happened to see before that Ichinose easily had more than a million personal points. She should've accumulated even more by now than she had before.

Name	Hiyori Shiina (椎名 ひより, <i>Shiina Hiyori</i>)
Class	1st Year, Class C
ID #	S01T004735
Club	Tea Ceremony Club
Birthday	January 21st

Assessment

Academic Ability	A-
Intellect	A-
Judgement	E
Physical Ability	E
Teamwork	D



Interviewer's Evaluation

This student is very silent. According to the submitted report, she has shown a preference for being alone since childhood. There is no existence she can call a friend, nor we have found for her to have a drive for wanting to make friends. We have discovered no issues with her academic skills, her attitude towards studying or her intelligence. We hope this student can improve her teamwork skills, ability to make friends and develop the means to deal with society.

Homeroom Teacher Records

This student has a high academic ability and treats her studies seriously. I expect for her to make improvements with her lack of teamwork skills.

Epilogue: Contrasting Decisions

(Introduction)

Although many students became depressed from the days of repeated studying, time still passed by.

And then winter came. After entering into December, the final exam was finally less than three days away. Tomorrow, the school will be closed for the weekend, then the final exam will be waiting for us on Monday.

To be honest, the challenge of the exam itself wasn't too much of a worry. As far as Class D is concerned, everyone has sufficient consistency and the results of the study groups are excellent. I can also assert that even Sudō, and the others who are often close to failing, have been working harder than ever.

The problem lies elsewhere. It's not too much to say that the problem lies with Ryūen and Kushida. No doubt they've begun to move under the water's surface, and I can roughly guess what they're going to do.

Ryūen's goals are to 'beat Class D's overall score' and 'smoke out the existence hiding behind Horikita'. For the former..... that is, the tactics available to him to beat our overall score are inevitably limited. The proper methods would be for Class C as a whole to study zealously, or to come up with super difficult questions. Either one works, but these are general strategies that Class D can also resort to.

I hardly know whether or not Class C has gathered for a large-scale study group. They haven't appeared in cafes, libraries, classrooms, or any other typical studying location.

Is it just a coincidence that I haven't seen them, or has Class C been working hard somewhere I'm unaware of? Even if they've studied hard, as long as Class D isn't overwhelmed, they'll be forced to fight a difficult battle. This doesn't seem like their tactic for winning the fight regardless.

Then, it's easy to imagine that they're looking at strategies from other perspectives.

"Thinking about something?"

"Oh, my bad."

Since I was at a standstill, Horikita looked up at me from the base of the stairs. I hurried downstairs to catch up with her.

She had a large brown envelope in her hand. It was stuffed with the questions that she had created with Hirata and the others over the last month. It held the fate of Class D itself.

Because of this, she didn't even let me in on the questions, making the information out to be strictly confidential. Since it was ultimately compiled by Horikita, she was the only one who knew all of the questions.

"What are the odds?"

“Hard to say. I hope you’re not expecting too much. After all, the school has also been making big adjustments to the questions. However, there’s no doubt that we’ve finished the most difficult part of the exam that we’ve been given so far.”

Horikita portrayed a certain level of confidence. Should I consider it to be solidly completed?

The question then becomes: ‘how do we protect the questions until the end?’

We came across another student in the corridor on our way to the staff room.

“Yo, Suzune.”

Ryūen was there with a fearless smile, holding the same brown envelope as Horikita.

“Is this a coincidence or an ambush?”

“It’s inevitable. I’ve been waiting for you to come.”

“An ambush, then.”

Horikita gave a disgusted sigh and proceeded to walk past Ryūen.

“Hold up, you’re also submitting your questions at the last minute, right? Let’s

go together.”

Ryūen spoke, displaying his envelope in front of Horikita.

“Since I don’t know who’s going to take a peek, I understand that you’re also going to be cautious.”

“You’re worrying about someone in your own class? Are you feeling okay?”

“Kuku. No idiot would actually try to betray me.”

“And despite that, you’ve waited until the last moment to submit your questions like I have.”

Horikita used an aggressive approach to return provocation for provocation. Ryūen should find this incredibly enjoyable.

We walked on and he proceeded to follow after us.

“I hope the wisdom you managed to squeeze out of your defective classmates works out well for us.”

Horikita kept walking, ignoring Ryūen’s existence.

“Ayanokōji-kun, have you been studying properly? I’m curious about the status of your partner as well.”

“As it is, I think failure can be avoided.”

“There’s no use in just thinking it. We can’t have any drop-outs at all. Do not be negligent even though we’re confident about anything Class C might throw at us.”

It appears that Ryūen didn’t intend to remain silent, as he once again responded to Horikita’s verbal jabs.

“Huh? Are you worrying about someone in your class? That was an interesting remark. It seems like you’re finally grasping our way of doing things.”

“Who knows. Maybe it was just a cheap provocation. It’s just like you.”

“Maybe so.”

Horikita called for Chabashira-sensei as soon as we arrived at the staff room. Shortly afterward, Chabashira-sensei showed her face.

Ryūen also called for Sakagami-sensei. Sakagami-sensei, who came first, took the brown envelope from Ryūen quietly.

“Will you accept this?”

“Aah. I’ll ask you later.”

After their short exchange, Chabashira-sensei showed up and changed places

with Sakagami-sensei.

“Looks like you’ve brought it.”

It seems that she already knew what was going on, and only looked down at the brown envelope.

She didn’t seem to pay particular attention to Ryūen on the side.

“Chabashira-sensei. These questions that I’m submitting are the final versions.”

“I’ll take it.”

Ryūen watched over the conversation with an eerie smile.

Horikita saw her teacher’s hand ready to receive the brown envelope and paused for a moment.

“I’d like to ask you something. Is right now alright for you?”

“Ah.”

“These questions and answers are equivalent to the success or failure of Class D. We must avoid any leakage of this information, by any means. After I give it to you, would you please refuse anyone who asks for you to show it to them? I don’t want them to be seen by anyone, including me.”

Horikita negotiated in light of her recent failure at the sports festival.

I don't know if Chabashira-sensei would understand that either.

"You want me to refuse to disclose the information?"

"Is that difficult?"

"That's not the case. I can understand your fear of an information leak, and your desire to make sure that doesn't happen. The school has no reason to refuse your request either. But, of course, it's conditional."

"Conditional, is it?"

"I have to determine whether or not it's the general will of the class. Has everyone approved of it?"

"I didn't take their words for it, but..... I think it's safe to consider this to be everyone's general will on the matter. Since no student wants their class to lose."

"You can't say that either. I've said something like that before, but each individual person can have an unexpectedly different opinion. It wouldn't be strange for there to be a student who wanted to lose."

"That's....."

Chabashira-sensei crossed her arms and added further:

“Furthermore, can you guarantee that the exam questions you have there are what your entire class expects? Your class hasn’t collectively consented to the questions before you brought them here.”

“Are you telling me to prove it? Do you want me to circulate the questions to everyone and confirm that there aren’t any issues?”

“I didn’t say that. I mean, things aren’t that simple. It’s impossible for me to tell if the student, Horikita Suzune, standing here before me is acting for the sake of her class. Nevertheless, I’ll grant you your request. If any students are to come in contact with me, I will never disclose the questions and answers that you’ve created.”

“Thank you very much. With this, I can face the exam at ease.”

“However. I’ll dare to tell you one more thing. In general, it’s not a good thing that you have to restrict information like this. It’s evidence that the class isn’t uniting together very well.”

This is certainly a reality that can’t be denied. If we didn’t have any suspicious classmates, we wouldn’t need to make this request in the first place, and also wouldn’t have anyone leak information like this. Although this is just part of my imagination, it’s probably impossible for something like this to happen for Class B.

“What harsh words. I’m seriously dedicated towards improving intraclass

relations right now.”

Upon hearing this, Chabashira-sensei smiled a little bit.

“You’ve changed too, Horikita.”

“.....Some things can't always stay the same forever.”

“I’ve definitely accepted your request. However, there may also be cases where disclosure should be permitted when necessary. Unforeseen situations can always happen. Therefore, I would like to add a condition to our deal. If, with your permission, someone asks to see the questions and answers, I will then disclose the information. Is that okay? If I had to assert that I would never show it to anyone, it would be a risk to you too, right?”

In short, 100% non-disclosure is not formally possible.

It doesn’t appear to matter how, Chabashira-sensei seems to want some means of disclosure to remain possible.

“That’s okay. However, please consider my presence to be another requirement.”

“That’s a good idea. It’s possible for someone to lie about having received your permission. Let’s recognize it then. If someone comes asking for the questions and answers, I will tell them exactly what you’ve said. That you did not want to disclose the information out of fear of an information leak. After all, I cannot afford to lie as a teacher.”

“That’s alright.”

Horikita was relieved that the negotiations had been successful for the time being.

It’s definitely not going to develop the same way as the sports festival now. Whether it’s Kushida or anyone else, even if they wanted to check the questions, it’s impossible without Horikita’s presence. There shouldn’t be any tricks here, as well.

Even if someone was willing to pay a number of points to scrap it, it’s obviously not enough of a reason to overturn this decision.

However, something’s strange.

I felt this as I listened silently to Chabashira-sensei and Horikita’s conversation.

The answer to this problem doesn’t emerge immediately, but there’s no doubt that something’s strange. It all seems to be going well so far. The questions were completed with an exquisitely high degree of difficulty; definitely worthy of the effort of Horikita, Hirata, and the others. It’s fine up to this point. Horikita then presented it to Chabashira-sensei while also putting measures in place to prevent the information from being leaked to others.

Even if Kushida obeys Ryūen and tries to get at the questions, a mechanism that requires Horikita’s permission and presence has been successfully established.

Everything is solid. There are no loopholes anywhere.....

I see. So that's the reason.

While there's nothing out of place with their conversation, there's distinctly something out of place with Chabashira-sensei.

Chabashira-sensei's eyes, movements, and attitude don't show this.

She solemnly accepted the exam questions and allowed Horikita to leave.

There was also Ryūen's confident attitude. Something about that laid-back behavior took my attention.

"Let's go, Ayanokōji-kun. We've finished our business here."

I didn't listen to her and instead looked into Chabashira-sensei eyes. She responded by staring into my own.

Realize it Horikita. Before it's too late--

I can't speak carelessly in front of Ryūen, and I can't send any excessive eye contact.

Even if we get through this, we might be in a situation where we don't have enough time to come back here again.

Horikita began to leave the staff room but immediately stopped in place.

“.....Chabashira-sensei. You just said you wouldn’t lie to me, right?”

“Yes. As a teacher, that much is only natural.”

“Then I ask you, will the questions and answers I submitted to you just now be accepted?”

She sensed it.

It was a slight wish, but Horikita caught on to the problem on her own.

“It’s unclear whether the questions will be accepted or not until it’s confirmed that there are no issues with them.”

“What’s the matter, Horikita?”

Horikita didn’t pay me any notice as I asked such a question.

“Then I’ll change how I’m asking. Before we introduce the current exam questions, there’s nothing like ‘we’ve already accepted different questions’ or ‘other questions are scheduled for acceptance,’ right?”

In the face of this inquiry, sensei’s eyes and mouth came to a standstill.

“What do you mean, that.....”

“Whatever happened, the answer can only come from Chabashira-sensei’s mouth.”

“.....I have a single answer to that question. The school has already finished accepting and reviewing the exam questions.”

So we were told. The truth of this situation was pointed out to us.

“This..... Does this mean someone else submitted the questions and answers?”

Her thoughts and feelings couldn’t catch up with the conversation.

“That’s right. In this situation, the questions that you’ve made won’t be accepted.”

“Please cancel the acceptance at once. The correct questions are right here.”

Horikita spoke, pointing to the brown envelope the teacher was holding.

However, based on the conversation so far, I knew it wasn’t such an easy thing to allow.

“I’m sorry, Horikita, but that’s your own selfish subjectivity. I received the exam questions from another student and already completed reviewing and

accepting them. They were worried about similar things too. They wanted me to keep the exam questions and answers private to avoid an information leak, and if someone who wants to change the questions shows up, to just take their questions and keep them. They also wanted me to tell them who came by afterward.”

“How could this happen.....”

Horikita fell limp on the spot.

It’s just too brutal a reality.

“Please, who is that student. You can tell me, right?”

“Kushida Kikyō.”

The answer was already obvious.

Horikita originally intended to block Kushida’s betrayal, but this means that Kushida struck the first blow. Kushida freely took bold and drastic action simply because we already knew about her other side.

“Depending on the situation, the accepted questions can be changed, right?”

“Right. Let’s deal with this unexpected situation. Do note that the deadline ends today. If you want to change the questions, please bring Kushida here.”

“Such a thing.....”

Impossible. Kushida wouldn't obediently say yes.

To overcome this problem, we'll have to visit Chabashira-sensei with Kushida.

However, even if we start looking for her now, Kushida would never be caught in time. She could almost 100% escape from us by simply turning off her phone and hiding in her room. No, isn't there a high probability that she isn't even in her room? Today is surely going to end without us finding her whereabouts.

“Horikita or Kushida... I can speculate about which one of you two is lying, but I don't know the truth. It's also possible that an unknown third party is pulling the strings. It's a problem for me if you don't settle this intraclass dispute.”

“.....How much longer do we have today? Until we can't correct the questions any longer.”

“By six P.M.”

I checked my phone. It's just before four in the afternoon, so in other words, we only had about two hours left.

“Kukuku..... K-kuhahaha! What the hell are you doing, Suzune!”

Ryūen had been watching the entire conversation and laughed.

The man who should have known about this from the beginning, spit out laughter at our desperate resilience.

“Aren’t you already damned? The questions that you created are completely meaningless!”

“Did you instigate this? You’re the one who instructed Kushida-san to turn in the questions, aren’t you!?”

“Aah, I don’t know. There’s no way I’m gonna know about Class D, is there?”

Horikita raised her voice as she responded to Ryūen’s obvious lies.

“I can’t stand for this conversation to be eavesdropped on any further by this outsider.....!”

“Oh so scary. I suppose I’ll head home obediently. I’m looking forward to the results of the exam.”

“.....Aren’t you going to look for Kushida, Horikita?”

“.....I hate the pointless effort.”

Even if we manage to find Kushida, the odds of her complying with us are nonexistent. This game has already been decided.

“Did Kushida-san instruct you to not show the exam questions?”

“No, I haven’t received an instruction like that.”

That wasn’t a surprise. Rather, it’s more like a reaffirmation of what we already believed.

“Let me see them, please.”

As she had permission, Horikita requested for Chabashira-sensei to show her the exam questions that Kushida submitted.

After a glance, I immediately had a single thought.

“These have a superb difficulty.”

“Yeah..... really.”

The questions that Kushida secretly submitted shouldn’t be that different than those prepared by Horikita. These were arguably a set of well-refined, splendid exam questions. So good that no one but the author would know which is which. Considering that Ryūen is involved, this is probably Kaneda’s handiwork. Because of this, a third party wouldn’t be able to know which side is telling the truth. If they were problems that even Sudō and the others could solve, Kushida would be suspected for submitting such simple questions. However, if the difficulty is similar, the truth immediately blurs.

Horikita had made a promise to not reveal Kushida’s past, and Hirata, who’s afraid of intraclass conflict, also wouldn’t say a word about it. In short, the

situation was that of first come first served.

If you know the answer ahead of time, it doesn't matter how difficult the questions are.

If all the students in Class C share the answers, they can get a super high score.

Having judged this, Kushida thoroughly camouflaged the information to such an extent and carried out their strategy.

Despite attending the study sessions and accepting Horikita's bet, she managed to solidly handle the situation.

If Class D loses, Horikita, who has taken the role of the leader of the class, would inevitably face part of the blame. Lowering her cohesive power, Ryūen is then used to drive Horikita into a desperate situation.

If it's just the creation of the exam questions, the situation can still be saved. So far, there's no helping the worst outcome.

However, the most important thing at hand here is the bet Horikita proposed.

The collusion between Kushida and Ryūen is certain, and it's entirely conceivable that in exchange for her cooperation, she will receive Class C's questions and answers.

In which case, Kushida will probably score 100 points. Then, if Horikita misses

even one question, she will have to voluntarily choose to drop out of school.

Horikita wouldn't break her promise either.

If she loses the bet, she will choose to drop out of school, even if it goes against her own will.

"Is there nothing more that can be done?"

With this, Class D's victory disappeared.

Kushida's preemptive strike should have impacted a great deal of damage on Horikita.

At first glance, she doesn't seem to have done anything to improve the situation, but that's not the case.

However, this was all caused by Horikita's careless planning.

If it was me--

"Anytime is fine, Horikita. Ryūen left."

Chabashira-sensei spoke such words to Horikita, who had her head hung low.

What's going on here?

Chabashira-sensei also didn't seem to be disturbed at all, diligently maintaining composure.

"I'm sorry, I was extremely cautious so I kept up the act for a long time."

As Horikita said this, she lifted her head. There were no signs of depression in her face at all.



Then I understood.

“You took countermeasures?”

“Yes. I was defeated at the sports festival, so I couldn’t afford to be defeated again in a similar way. When the details of the final exam were first announced, I immediately consulted Chabashira-sensei. I had two requests: ‘I have the right to make decisions about the submission of the exam questions’ and ‘I want you to pretend to accept them if anyone else comes to submit their own.’”

In other words, Kushida was misdirected into believing that her exam questions were accepted.

“They must be convinced that the exam questions were changed. If they aren’t studying for the exam, there may be dropouts in Class C.”

I never thought that she would make such a beautiful counterattack, I didn’t even expect anything close to this.

Chances are Ryūen won’t be able to notice Horikita’s movements and predict her first strike.

“Nevertheless, this is a daunting situation. Until now, I have never heard of a request like this. Even from the Class D I’ve been placed in charge of. I didn’t expect my class to be so cautious and deceptive of each other in a school system like ours. Things won’t always go so smoothly, Horikita. If there are traitors in the class, any exam that could have been won won’t be won.”

Chabashira-sensei showed a rare look of worry.

That's exactly right. To prevent exam questions from being submitted, and to lie about accepting it. They're unnecessary actions that the other classes would never need to do. Even for the divided Katsuragi faction and Sakayanagi faction of Class A, they probably wouldn't have gone so far.

To that extent, this indicated that we need to be precise with how we deal with Kushida.

"I understand. However, I intend to end this matter with this final exam."

I could feel her determination to bring this conflict between comrades to an end.

"Really? In that case, let's look forward to it."

Horikita breathed a sigh of relief as she watched Chabashira-sensei return to the staff room with the brown envelope.

"I'm sorry for keeping you in the dark about this."

When the two of us were alone, she bowed down and apologized.

"No, that's fine. To be honest, I wasn't aware of this at all."

Although my opportunities to work with Horikita had diminished, I really

underestimated her.

“I don’t know how many times he’s knocked me down, so it’s about time for me to learn from that.”

This not only shattered the definite victory of Class C, but Class D also got one step ahead.

However, Horikita’s tough challenge still remains.

“All that’s left is to beat Kushida-san’s score on the final exam, and with that, this will end without incident.”

That’s right. Horikita has no future here if she doesn’t beat Kushida’s score on the finals.

In order to ensure that she doesn’t lose, it’s a requirement for her to score full marks on the math portion of the final exam.

(Intro End)

(Part 1)

Today, the first half of the final exam begins. The required overall score for each pair was determined to be 692 points. It's lower than expected, but we can't be careless. It should be safe to say that this match will be decided by the end of the day today.

It's a match where the outcome is determined by the difficulty of our questions and their ability to apply pressure on the students in the other class. The first day of the finals consists of the exams for four subjects: Japanese, English, Social Studies, and Mathematics.

This means that Horikita and Kushida's fates will be decided today as well.

As I walked down the corridor on the way to the classroom, I met up with Satō who appeared to be waiting for someone.

For better or worse, the person she was waiting for appeared to be me, as she came close when she saw me.

"Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun. The exam is just around the corner."

"Aah. Did you sleep well last night?"

"I went to bed after studying til one o'clock, but I'm starting to feel a little nervous."

With that, she put her hand on her chest and took a deep breath.

"Though I can't say it will be easy, let's do our best for each other. You should be able to do well if you just demonstrate what you've studied."

“Yeah!”

No matter the form, we’re still a pair. I can’t deny that we’re a coexisting body now that we’re sharing the same fate. If Satō fails, I fail, and if I fail, Satō also fails. We could easily drag each other down into the abyss.

“Good morning, Satō-san.”

“Oh! Good morning, Karuizawa-san.”

Having arrived at school, Karuizawa saw Satō and called out to her.

“By any chance, did you already have arrangements with Ayanokōji-kun? You two are a very unusual combination.”

“N-no. Not at all. We just met up by chance.....”

“Is that so? Well, why don’t we grab a drink at Pallet together before we head to class?”

“Yeah! Well then, I’ll see you later Ayanokōji-kun!”

She spoke a bit bashfully as she turned away from me.

Karuizawa looked my way for an instant before heading off with Satō.

“Huh, so they were on good terms?”

“I suppose Karuizawa can be quite the jealous girl, surprisingly.”

“Eh?”

The one who spoke was none other than Hirata.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. What did you mean by that, just a second ago?”

“I’ve spent a lot of time together with Karuizawa-san while playing the role of her boyfriend. I’ve faintly noticed that she has started to pay more attention to you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“No, I don’t think that’s it.”

Karuizawa had been forced to change her parasitic host from Hirata to myself, so it can’t be helped that he would see it that way.

“Is that so? From where I stand, I’m glad it turned out like that. After all, I don’t think it’s healthy to be in a fake relationship. Sorry, that’s me being selfish so pay it no mind.”

That said, the two of us started towards the classroom.

“The questions Horikita-san thought up should definitely hinder Class C. As for what remains, I don’t think it will be very difficult to win as long as everyone handles the exam well.”

Hirata was also overflowing with confidence.

To a certain extent, he seems to see the path to victory for this exam.

Even though an unexpected pair of students had been matched up with each other, everything had more or less happened as expected.

“By the way, There’s something I wanted to ask you, Ayanokōji-kun. Do you know Shiina Hiyori-san?”

“She’s a Class C student, right? We met the other day when they showed up at Keisei’s study group.”

“They came to mine as well. It appears that Class C is looking for the mastermind working within Horikita’s shadow.”

“It seems so.”

“Ayanokōji-kun, you’re the person they’re looking for, aren’t you?”

Hirata wasn’t asking because he wanted to know, he was asking because he wanted to confirm.

“Ah, no. Of course I wouldn’t tell anyone else. You probably have your reasons for keeping this hidden. It’s also true that Class D sees benefits as a result of your actions.”

“Is that so? I’ll take your words as a warning then.”

“So you don’t deny it.”

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I did.”

“That’s... yeah. Maybe so.”

“I’m not some hero, and I’m not hiding my true colors. I just don’t want to stand out. That’s my real intention and how I truly feel.”

“Then I assume that you probably had a reason for doing what you did at the sports festival. But was that a safe thing to do? Class C has started making their move. If it turns out that you need my help, I’ll gladly cooperate.”

I appreciated Hirata’s offer, but it just isn’t necessary at the moment.

“I’ll figure something out. I’ll rely on you in case something happens.”

“I see.”

We arrived at the classroom. I examined the expressions of Sudō and the others from a distance. There was a clearly different look about them compared

to previous exams. They were composed, using their time to make whatever final confirmations they needed to instead of memorizing the subject matter in a panic. It wasn't just one or two people, nearly half of the class was concentrated and engaged.

"This is quite the difference, right?"

"Truly."

If you showed this scene to someone who had witnessed Class D several months ago, they still wouldn't be able to believe it.

If this school didn't emphasize results above all, this might not have been the case.

"Have you prepared yourself?"

My neighbor Horikita was reading a book instead of studying for the exam.

"What are you reading?"

"And Then There Were None."

"Agatha Christie? Let's hope there are some left after this."

Horikita closed her book to reject my dark joke.

“Nobody is going to disappear. It goes without saying that you and I won’t as well.”

“The look on your face says that you’re going to win no matter the opponent.”

“Naturally. I’ve prepared to take first place in our school year this time.”

“If Class C’s questions turn out to be too simple, placing first will be very difficult.”

“I’ll win despite that. It keeps me motivated.”

Then I’ll really be looking forward to it. Show me your unshakable confidence with the final exam.

(Part 1 End)

(Part 2)

When the preliminary bell rang, everyone packed up their study materials. We were obligated to store anything unnecessary for the exams in the lockers at the back of the classroom. The only thing we were allowed to leave at our

desks was a writing utensil. Additional supplies could be obtained if, for example, a pencil gets too short or breaks, a mechanical pencil runs out of lead, or an eraser gets used up. The only thing we would need to do is report it to Chabashira-sensei.

“You’ll take your first end of term exam after this: Modern Japanese. It’s forbidden to turn your paper over until I give the signal to start. Pay attention to this.”

Chabashira-sensei didn’t have the student at the front of each row pass the exams backward but instead placed the exam sheets on each desk one at a time.

“The exam lasts for fifty minutes. Try to avoid calling in sick or the need to use the restroom as much as possible. If you aren’t able to wait it out whatsoever, please let me know by raising your hand. You aren’t allowed to leave the classroom for any other reason after the start of the exam.”

She told us about the rules for the conduct of the exam as she finished handing out the exam papers to everyone.

None of the students were whispering to each other anymore. Everyone’s attention had been set on their exam sheets.

Shortly after, the next bell rang, announcing the beginning of the exam.

“Well then, you can start.”

As soon as she spoke, everyone turned the exam over at the same time.

If everything goes according to Keisei's prediction, the questions will have an overall trend so our countermeasures will hit right on the mark.

I skimmed through the questions from top to bottom to see whether my classmates would be able to solve them.

There were merciless questions lined up, starting from the very first one. Despite this, there wasn't anything unsolvable. There were quite a few questions that had already been predicted with pinpoint accuracy and quite a few that could be solved as long as you remained calm.

In other words, this means that Keisei's objective was successful.

Moreover, there were large revisions to the content as instructed by the school.

Although there are traces that show attempts at making misleading questions, there are also traces of these questions being forcibly corrected.

Nonetheless, it's unlikely that we'll be able to stop our average grade from falling lower than the last midterm exam. If there's a student who's behind in their studies, they might end up with 10 to 20 points. Taking this into consideration, the supporting partner definitely needs to take more than 50 points, or preferably more than 60 points, if possible.

If it's the skilled people in the class, it seems like they'll be able to pass the 60-point hurdle, but they still can't be careless.

The largest problem in this situation is the groups of students in the middle like Haruka and Akito. They'll have to stand firm in this situation. Their weak point, the humanities, absolutely must be defended as if their lives depended on it.

From the seat next to me, Horikita immediately picked up her pen and started on the first question.

Horikita was investing herself into a fight she absolutely couldn't afford to lose.

I spun my pen in circles as I thought about what I should do.

Relative to other students, Satō was enthusiastic about attending the study sessions, so I anticipate that she'll score higher than Ike and Yamauchi. However, there's also a need to compliment her score with a suitable score of my own.

This time around, individual scores won't inadvertently raise the classes failing line. So after considering the future, I decided to take the exam on a 60 point basis.

More than that, the important thing is-

I raised my head.

My eyes crossed with Chabashira-sensei who was watching the class from the podium.

However, Chabashira-sensei wasn't the one I was paying attention to.

Instead, I took note of how Kushida Kikyō was handling the exam in front of her.

Even though the exam had started, there was no indication that her arm was moving. She appeared to be checking something as she went over the questions several times.

She made sure of everything for two or three minutes before she finally began to solve the exam questions.

In this way, the tense exams continued past the first without any time for leisure or idle chatter.

However, there was a slight incident during the fourth exam.

It happened during the math exam, which is supposed to be when Horikita and Kushida's direct confrontation would be decided.

It was immediately after we turned our exams over after the start signal.

"Why....."

Kushida's voice leaked out despite her attempt to suppress it.

“What’s wrong Kushida?”

“N-no, I’m sorry. It’s nothing.”

Our classmates expressed their concern for Kushida, whose voice leaked out for a moment, but she started on the questions immediately anyways.

I looked carefully and understood.

Her unrest was an unimaginable appearance compared to Kushida’s usual composure.

It appears that man decided to make ‘that’ choice.

Horikita worked on the math problems without being distracted by Kushida’s agitation.

It’s a straight and proper matchup, just to demonstrate the fruits of this last month’s effort.

It’s powerful because it’s simple.

Well. Should I concentrate on the exam now that the source of my troubles has faded away?

(Part 2 End)

(Part 3)

“.....Fuu.”

Horikita sighed and slowly looked up at the ceiling of the classroom.

“You look like you’ve done everything you can.”

“I’ve never considered studying to be a pain, but I studied more than ever before for this exam.”

“What score would you give yourself on the math exam?”

“100 points..... at least that’s what I want to say. Since there was one particularly unclear question, at the very least I can say that I scored 98 points. There were some questions with a reasonably high degree of difficulty mixed in.”

She instantly asserted her self-graded score without any hesitation.

“It’s also possible that you made a mistake or omitted an answer. Is there a chance of getting anything lower?”

“None. I’m absolutely confident that I’ve overcome this exam, at the very least. I think that I managed to get nearly perfect scores in the other three subjects as well.”

“That’s great...”

“I challenged Kushida-san to this bet on the assumption that she would manage a score of 100 points. I was thorough in my approach in order to not make even the slightest of mistakes. As a result, however, it’s just shameful since I might have failed to score the final two points.”

Humans make mistakes. It’s also possible that she scored below a 98.

This is because the problems that Kaneda created weren’t easy ones.

I don’t know if even someone like Keisei would manage to score above a 90.

Regardless, It’s not possible to say for sure right now.

If she did, in fact, take a perfect score, she would undoubtedly get the top grade in the class.

Despite tutoring many of her classmates, Horikita managed to overcome everything with her own willpower and spirit.

“Suzune, I have something I’d like to report. Do you want to head back together?”

Finished with the exam, Sudō came over with his bag in hand, a little low-spirited.

“Something you want to report? I’m sorry, but could you please say it here?”

“Today’s exams... I don’t think I reached 40 points in every subject. I’d like to apologize for that. My bad.”

It seems that he planned to apologize to Horikita on their way home, but he ended up apologizing here.

“It’s not a bad thing. The difficulty of the exam changes every time. Considering what was on today’s tests, you’ve done a good job.”

This exam was more difficult than usual, so getting lower scores is inevitable.

“I have some plans, so you can head back with your friends.”

“Are you staying too, Ayanokōji? Going home together or something?”

He gave the two of us a look, skeptical about whether or not we were going to do something.

“It has nothing to do with him. I have an appointment with Kushida-san. Is that also a problem?”

“With Kushida? No problem.”

Sudō withdrew immediately after he realized that she intended on meeting with another girl.

“I’ll head home and study then.”

“Yes, but considering tomorrow, please go to bed early.”

“I know. Kanji, Haruki, let’s go back together.”

Sudō offered to head home with them with a calm attitude, nothing like his usual harsh appearance.

You can naturally avoid the risk of failing if you learn to study. And because we can respond to each test separately without panic, a clear mind is born as well.

“By the way, what’s your arrangement with Kushida?”

“It’s not that important. Both of us should have put forward the effort to keep track of our scores, so I intend to confirm things with her.”

There’s some free time until the results of the test are announced.

If their self-evaluated scores make it clear enough, the winner of the bet could be decided without the need to wait for the official results.

However, I've already been convinced.

Horikita Suzune has won.

There isn't any need to ask about the results. The outcome is clear just from looking at Kushida's shaken appearance.

Kushida stood up and unsteadily walked out of the classroom.

"I wonder what's wrong with her....."

"She's probably realized that she scored lower than she expected to, right?"

"I hope so. However, he's also pretty whimsical, after all."

"Are you wondering about what's going on with Ryūen?"

"In the event where he gives her the answers, there's a possibility that she'll score perfectly on the exam. In which case, my only options would be to lose or to draw. You and I would also have to voluntarily drop out."

"In that case, do you intend to prostrate yourself to Kushida and beg for forgiveness?"

"Is that sarcasm?"

"What?"

“Nothing.”

Horikita ran to catch up with Kushida, and I decided to follow in her footsteps as well.

“Kushida-san.”

As Horikita stepped into corridor she called out to Kushida, who slowly stopped walking.

“What, Horikita-san?”

Her face was tired and weary.

“Is right now a good time? There’s something I’d like to confirm. There will be people coming and going here, so can we change places?”

“It depends on what you want to talk about, but this location may be an issue.”

“Before you make your decision, do note that Ayanokōji-kun will be coming along as well. Since he’s been dragged into all of this, you don’t mind, right?”

Kushida didn’t say anything, but she also didn’t refuse.

She checked the time on her cell phone and nodded.

She should have arranged to meet ‘somebody’ after this.

There were still a lot of students in the school. To be on the safe side, we moved to the special building.

“The thing you want to confirm with me is, of course, our bet on the final exam, right?”

“Yes. Even though the results won’t be released until later on, we should have been keeping track of our scores.”

“Yeah..... I did.”

In this bet, Horikita gambled her future at the school, whereas Kushida gambled a substantial amount of her dignity.

Whatever the form, it is impossible for her to not have kept track of how many points she will get.

“I’m confident that I got at least 98 points. How about you?”

Although it’s small, there was anxiety and doubt in Horikita as well.

If Ryūen lends a hand to Kushida, it will have a significant impact on our fate.

Kushida wasn’t surprised to hear Horikita’s results. No, it’s as if she already

knew.

“The outcome is clear even if we don’t wait for the results.”

She muttered, a slight amount of self-mockery in her voice.

“I couldn’t have scored better than 80. No, probably not even 80. So... it’s your victory, Horikita-san.”

“Is that so.....”

Since Kushida’s score was lower than she expected, Horikita felt a little puzzled.

“I thought you would place higher if you focused on your studies.”

“This is just the kind of person I am.”

She answered disparagingly, and then sighed.

“Officially, this lasts until after the results are released..... I wonder if it will become my win?”

Since the school announces the results of the exam, there’s no room for mistakes.

“That shouldn’t be necessary. You won this bet. Are you satisfied, Horikita-

san?”

Kushida also understood that even if Horikita made a mistake in her scoring, there wouldn't be an error of nearly 20 points.

“Can I believe it then? That you'll cooperate with me in the future?”

“I'll fulfill my promise. No matter how much I disagree with it. Do you want it in writing?”

“No need. Let's start by trusting each other.”

As Horikita spoke, she held out her hand.

She wanted to come to an agreement with a handshake.

Kushida was completely motionless. She stared at Horikita's hand with colorless eyes.

“I hate you, Horikita-san.”

“I know. But I think I can work hard to change that.”

Horikita received her emotions head-on.

“It seems that I'm beginning to hate you more and more.”

Kushida walked past Horikita without so much as an attempt at taking her hand.

Horikita's outstretched hand grasped at the air in vain.



“I won’t interfere, but I will never cooperate with you. Don’t forget this.”

“.....Is that so? It’s a shame, but it can’t be helped. Those are the conditions, after all.”

“Don’t forget, Horikita-san. The only condition is to refrain from getting in your way.”

While her gaze was weak, the dark color of her eyes still latched onto me.

“That’s-”

Kushida left without another word, as if she was saying that she didn’t want to face Horikita for even one more second.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Horikita was no longer her target, but does that mean it’s now my turn?

It seems like an argument for argument's sake, but my safety was definitely not included as a term of the bet.

“I should have weighed the stakes of the bet a bit more carefully.”

That said, it’s likely that nothing will change with this.

I had come to a single conclusion. Kushida won’t keep her promise forever.

Because this isn't something that she can easily come to terms with. In order to protect her own existence, Horikita and I are absolutely in the way. For Kushida, we're just foreign substances.

As long as we're still around, Kushida won't be able to embrace a secure future.

The most that I can expect is for this temporary rest to last a second longer.

(Part 3 End)

(Part 4)

After parting ways with Horikita, I thought about the future.

The Ryūen Kakeru of my imagination is not the type of person to leave things unfinished like this.

Horikita certainly did a good job this time. She confined Ryūen, who manipulated Kushida, with a well placed preemptive strike.

Originally, her approach wouldn't be very useful during a class conflict where it's difficult for allies to betray each other, but it's truly an effective strategy

when a traitor is already lurking. However, her method can't always be used. It's limited to situations such as the sports festival and exams like this one.

That's why she took the initiative to secure her brother as a witness, effectively creating a one in a million opportunity. Class D studied intensively for the month before to the final exam, so it shouldn't be possible for us to lose to Class C. Overall, this could be considered to be a complete victory.

My phone began to vibrate.

[What are you scheming?]

I received such a message.

It's not just me. Aren't you scheming something too, Ryūen?

[I'll make you pay the price for using me.]

He sent another short message, followed by another one shortly afterward.

There was a file attached this time.

It was an image file. After I opened it, it turned out to be a single photograph.

There was no text included in the message because the image alone says it all.

“As expected, Manabe and the others confessed after all.”

Although I already knew this the moment Ryūen came into contact with Hiyori.

Even if I don't see how he handles things, I can easily imagine.

He probably utilized threats similar to intimidation and extortion in order to get to the traitor.

And now, names like Keisei's and my own will be on his mind, deepening his suspicions.

However, he has no evidence. He also can't come to any conclusions, given the possibility that the mastermind might still be lurking.

That being said, Ryūen's move to corner me here undoubtedly has to be for that reason.

It isn't necessary for me to think very hard about what his intention is with this photograph.

The fact that he has this photograph in the first place means that her background is known to a certain extent.

Depending on the situation, Ryūen's fangs will also turn towards the person pictured in this photograph.

No, it's more like hanging the bait in front of him is a declaration of war.

“He should've stayed silent after all.”

To think that he would reveal the information he obtained so easily. Is he enjoying this?

I was already getting somewhat tired of his obsessive searching.

I closed my cell phone and hardened my will at the same time.

It seems that there's no reason to go about this half-heartedly if my goal is to dampen his mental strength.

If he's intent on waging war, I'll match up with him.

“Come at me with full force so you have nothing to regret afterward. I'll play this game with you on your own playing field.”

I was reluctant, but I couldn't help feeling a little excited.

(Part 4 End)

(Part 5)

“You're late, Kikyō. Were you having trouble slipping away from your classmates?”

“What do you mean by that, Ryūen-kun?”

Kushida appeared on a remote rooftop. She drew closer to Ryūen without trying to conceal her true nature.

“Ah?”

“The questions and answers you gave me turned out to be completely different from the ones on the exam.”

“Oh, yeah. I switched out the questions right before the deadline. What about it?”

He laughed a bit scornfully before taking a drink of mineral water from his plastic bottle.

“Like I told you. I will force Horikita to drop out no matter what I have to do. Solely for this reason, I betrayed my classmates and secretly submitted Class D's exam questions. The condition was that I'd get the questions and answers for Class C's math questions in return. If you had kept your promise, Horikita would've voluntarily withdrawn herself from school by now. And yet, you betrayed me.”

“What? Are you mad about something like that?”

“Something like that? You come out ahead against Class D, and you’re just going to end it with that?”

“You’re fundamentally misunderstanding the situation, Kikyō. The questions you made weren’t used on the exam.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? I turned in the exam questions as soon as possible just as you instructed. I also confirmed everything with Chabashira-sensei. There were no mistakes.”

“You haven’t noticed yet? Suzune took the steps ahead of time to prevent your exam questions from being formally adopted. Thanks to that, we not only failed to come out ahead, but also narrowly avoided expulsion. The whole class was depending on this strategy.”

“Wait a second..... Ahead of time? Such..... No way.....”

“Just wait for the results of the exam if you don’t believe me. Ten to one, Class C lost to Class D. In other words, our agreement is invalid. I can’t afford to show you the correct answers to the exam questions if I don’t receive anything in return. That’s the natural turn of events.”

“Tsk.....!”

“Though I’ll tell you this, Kikyō. You have no right to bear any grudges against me so how about thanking me instead?”

“Thanking you!? I lost to Suzune, you know!? What do you want me to thank you for!?”

She thought back to the humiliation of being forced to declare defeat before Horikita. It was enough to make her blood boil over in anger.

“For you to get caught in this trap without even knowing it, you sure take things easy.”

Ryūen drew close to Kushida and grabbed her uniform.

He then forcibly unfastened the button of her blazer and began to reach inside.

“Hey! What are you doing!?”

Ryūen smiled as Kushida pushed away from him in a panic.

“Jeez, I’m not going to do anything. Search inside your pocket.”

“.....Inside my pocket?”

While still on guard, Kushida slowly reached into the inner pocket of her blazer.

There was a paper feeling that she wasn’t expecting to come across. After

taking it out, she found a folded piece of paper.

“What is this.....”

Ryūen shouldn't have had the time to put something inside just now. In other words, it had already been placed there beforehand. When she opened the paper, she found a list of questions and answers for the recent math exam.

However, these weren't the questions that were on the exam that was given today. Instead, they were the ones that Ryūen originally said he would submit.

“Why is something like this in my blazer.....”

“There'll probably be more than that. There should be several cheating materials scattered throughout your personal belongings. You'll find them if you try looking for them later.”

“I don't understand what this means.”

“Someone in Class D was prepared to take you out. What would happen if you were accused of cheating during or shortly after the exam? What if I decided to use those questions after all? What do you think would happen if they found that paper on you after you had done well on the exam?”

“I'd be expelled? Even if I didn't cheat? That's stupid!”

“There should be some way to prove it if you're truly innocent, but it's also true that you got the answers beforehand by joining forces with me. So even if

you're determined to be guilty, it can't be helped."

Of course, it's possible for her to claim that the situation was designed by somebody else. Although she's more innocent than guilty, she'd still be tainted with suspicion. This is because of the undeniable fact that Ryūen had supplied her with the questions and answers for Class C. Even though it's not against the rules to give these to another class, the suspicion still wouldn't disappear. Even if she managed to avoid expulsion, suspicions of guilt would still remain and the results of the exam would become invalid. Even though these suspicions would never be anything more than speculation, Kushida would've also jeopardized Class D's position, and the trouble would downpour onto Class C as well.

"When did this cheat sheet manage to....."

"You don't have any idea? Have there been any strange things going on around you recently?"

"It's possibly..... no, but..... I went to the final strategy meeting with Horikita and the others at Karaoke last week. I suppose something a little strange did happen then. It's not clear why, but a girl began to throw accusations around and then poured her juice on me out of anger. After that, she insisted on taking it to the dry cleaners to make up for it. It's understandable given the situation..... and I don't think there's any connection..... but it's somehow still on my mind."

"I'll take a guess at who that girl is. Karuizawa Kei, right?"

".....How do you know that? Don't tell me you saw it?"

“How could I have possibly seen it? The reason is simple.”

Ryūen tapped his finger against the side of his head to emphasize his deductive capability.

“Explain it in detail, starting from the beginning.”

Though Kushida still felt dissatisfied, she fully explained the details of the incident at the Karaoke box. That Horikita and Hirata summoned everyone together, that she had been seated at the table with Ayanokōji, Sudō, and Karuizawa, and that in the middle of the discussion, Karuizawa had picked on her and ultimately poured juice onto her blazer.

Having listened to her in silence, Ryūen connected the reasoning a step further.

“No doubt, that was a set-up.”

“Not possible. I gave my blazer to the laundromat, but I definitely checked the pockets when I handed it over. Besides, the store would have told me if there was anything I missed when I came back to get it. So even if Karuizawa had tried to set a trap back then, wouldn’t it have been meaningless?”

“Indeed, that feat would be next to impossible to pull off at that point in time. However, that wasn’t her goal. Didn’t someone want to know whether or not you had a spare uniform?”

“Spare? Even if that were the case, it’s still impossible.”

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“Are you saying that everyone there had set a trap for me and I wasn’t able to see through it? I’m not an idiot. I’m always observing the behavior and conduct of the people around me. I definitely would’ve felt something out of place if they were all lying to me.”

“Well, that’s probably right. However, the number of people who were lying to you was one or two at most.”

“Haa? How did something like that-”

“There’s nothing to worry about. If there was someone who read the situation perfectly, deceiving you is just par for the course. Someone able to trace everyone’s thought patterns, characteristics, habits, and reactions to what’s going on around them. What kind of remarks you would make. Someone who managed to completely predict everything. Someone who planned out the script to your story as you wrote it.”

As Kushida thought back to that time, she began to think all of this might be possible. In particular, Hirata’s had a way of thinking that was consistently pacifist. He would be concerned if the blazer got stained, and he would also want to deal with Karuizawa’s unreasonable anger. Since it was just before the test, he would definitely want to ask whether or not she had a spare uniform as well. She began to think that might just be the case.

“Once they learned that you only had one blazer, the only thing left to do is plant the cheat sheet in it during gym class or something. It isn’t strange that you didn’t check the inside pocket of your blazer during the one or two days

after you got it back from the cleaners. I suppose that there were a lot of other times where they could have tampered with it too. Nevertheless, the important question here is who thought of it. Not Suzune or Karuizawa, at least. They're not the type who could do something like that."

"So you're saying that I was ensnared by them?"

"Not long before the exam, there was a letter that charged Ichinose with illegally getting her points, right?"

"It's the one where you set her up. Why was that? There didn't turn out to be anything illegal after all."

"It's a strategy that adequately shows what type of person the mastermind is."

"What?"

"I'm not the one who sent out that letter. The guy in Class D who set you up did."

"I don't get what you mean."

"Do you think I would bother putting a letter preaching of Ichinose's suspicions in every first-year student's mailbox and print my name on each one? No, I wouldn't, but since my name was written on the letters, it's only natural that everyone will think I'm the principal offender."

“You should’ve denied it if wasn’t you.”

“Do you think I would?”

“.....No.”

Kushida understood right away. Ryūen has always had a tendency to pursue the exciting. He would’ve definitely found the situation amusing if someone sent out letters in his name. Furthermore, since he’d never heard of the suspicions against Ichinose, he’d also want to know the truth.

Then, why did they specifically write Ryūen’s name as the sender of the letter? Because if the sender is unknown, the credibility of the message would be greatly reduced. This doubt might cause the situation to be handled even more irresponsibly.

“But what was the point? They leaked out strange information, and also put you on guard.”

“I don’t know..... I’ve thought about it, but it’s unclear. Did he simply want to know for a fact about Ichinose’s large quantity of points? Or..... No, that’s not possible. It can’t be for such a stupid reason.”

Ryūen was about to say it, but then he stopped himself. It was simply too out of touch with reality.

“Hey, Kikyō. I don’t know about your past, and I’m not really interested in that sort of thing. However, if you continue persistently trying to have Horikita drop-out of school, you’re going to be wiped out.”

This strategy was prepared with great care and executed without mercy. This was definitely the character that Ryūen is looking for, X.

“Things aren’t looking good for you either. Isn’t it bad for Class C to lose this special exam?”

“That’s right. With this, your Class D is now within reach of promoting to Class C.”

“How do you feel about getting dropped down by that defective Class D?”

Ryūen didn’t feel anything in particular, even in response to Kushida’s relentless question.

This was because he never had any interest in such trivial matters from the very beginning.

“It feels fantastic. Whether it’s with class A, D, or whatever, the showdowns so far have only scratched the surface of what there is to reveal.”

“.....What does that mean?”

Of course, Ryūen wouldn’t answer. However, his objective still hasn’t changed since he entered the school. While there’ve been times when things haven’t gone according to plan, preparations for promotion to Class A have been well underway.

“Do the best you can and aim for the upper class.”

Ryūen said this and then turned around, intending to leave.

“This cheat sheet.....!? Wait! Isn’t there something a little strange!?”

“Kuku.....”

Kushida had noticed something inexplicable after looking at the cheat sheet.

“Tell me what’s going on, Ryūen.”

“You noticed?”

Some contradiction. Something that shouldn’t be there. A new problem had swelled up.

“Why does someone in Class D have the test questions that only you and I should have? I can’t think of any reason.”

“That’s right. The reason why X was able to use these questions is because I gave them to him.”

“So you betrayed me.”

“That’s not true. It was a necessary deal to make with him.”

Ryūen took a look at his cell phone. There were pictures of the questions and answers before he changed them out.

Ryūen sent these pictures to someone's unidentified email address.

“However..... He understands me well.”

Before Ryūen sent the pictures, he had received several messages from X.

The first one had a title that read ‘Transaction’. The content of the message was this:

[Provide Class C's finalized questions and answers for the end of term exam.]

[Otherwise, make significant changes to the questions and answers you provide Kushida Kikyō.]

This was the message that Ryūen had received.

Usually, Ryūen wouldn't respond to something like this.

However, X had given him useful information that benefited Class C with no strings attached.

The information was that Horikita Suzune had seen through Ryūen and Kushida's tactics, and had made a preemptive strike. This had come out of the blue for Ryūen, who had been anticipating complete success with Kushida's replacement of the exam questions.

If not for this information, some of his classmates who were behind in their studies might have had to drop-out. Knowing this, Ryūen had three options available to him as to how to proceed.

The first was to disobey X and let Kushida win. However, this was something that Ryūen, who didn't want Horikita to drop out of school, wanted to avoid as much as possible. The second was to not change out the exam questions and let X expose Kushida for cheating and make her drop out of school. However, it wasn't fun to abide by X's ideal progression of the situation, so he didn't consider this option.

Ryūen's final option was to change out the exam questions and let Horikita win the exam.

"So he managed to protect Suzune, while sealing off Kikyō's options at the same time?"

Suzune was fighting on the surface, and someone else was controlling things behind the scenes.

Ryūen couldn't help but laugh as he thought about how his strategy of using Kushida was in turn, used against him.

"But I'm about to push him over the edge. If he doesn't show his true colors--"

He opened up the image file that he sent to X once again.

“At that time, I’ll just have to destroy him.”

Ryūen was convinced that the person in that photograph is an important piece to the puzzle of uncovering that person’s identity.



Afterword

From here forward, the main part of the volume is finished. Volume 6 has come to an end. I'm Shōgo Kinugasa. My current worry is that the atheroma forming in my body has grown to golf ball size recently. Scary.

This time 'Classroom of the Elite' also concluded the series overall 7th volume. This volume should be like a place of healing, the calm before the storm. I've decided to describe the innermost changes within each character. In the next volume, I think that the story will develop more than ever before, including a decisive battle with a certain enemy, as well as the past of Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.

And then... Yes. We've decided to animate 'Classroom of the Elite' (You Jitsu). All of you deserve the credit for making this possible, so thank you very much. Tomose and I were very pleased, and the other day marks ten years that we have been licking each other's wounds. (The meaning is implied.)

The anime will broadcast at the end of July, probably about two months after this volume is released. At that time, I will certainly be able to present you with the seventh volume! (Having it go according to plan after I declare it is something that has never happened before!)

Between the editors, publishing house, anime production company, there will be a variety of people involved moving forward. I will do my utmost to not let these efforts be disgraced. Thank you very much.